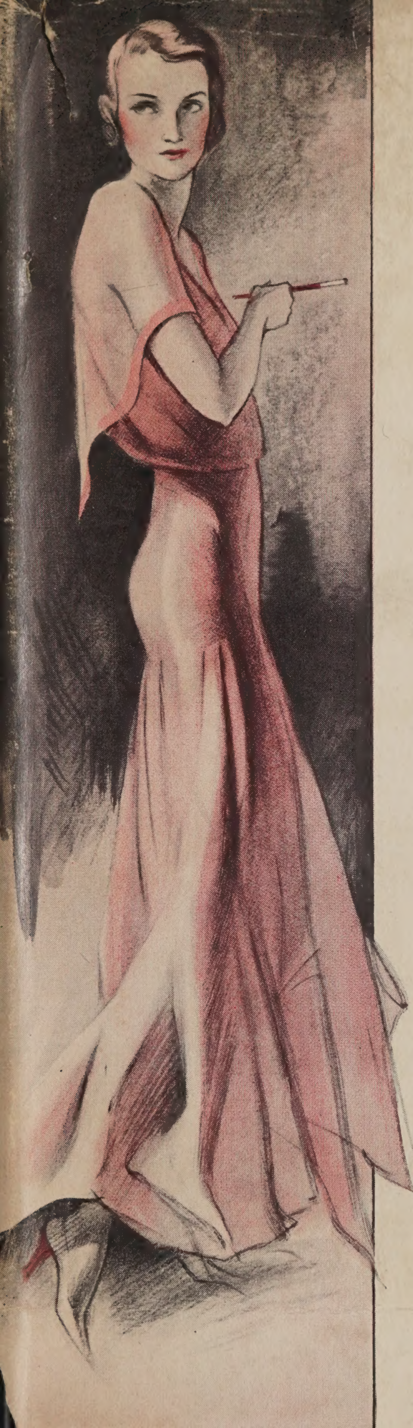

the Mysterious Miss Morrisot

Love, murder, mystery, in Paris and on the Riviera, thrillingly described by the creator of Clubfoot, the super-spy.

Valentine Williams

$2.00

THE MYSTERIOUS MISS MORRISOT

By Valentine Williams

WHEN Oliver Royce met Jacqueline Morrisot at Cannes she was the manager for Victor the couturier. That Oliver lost his job as an immediate consequence of falling in love with her was not perhaps important, but that Jacqueline should lose her own post at Victor's was a more serious matter. It is from that point that the mystery begins to deepen. Oliver becomes the valet of Harvey Nolan, one of the most interesting characters in the book, a middle-aged American of great wealth. If he yields for a moment to sentiment and his admiration of Jacqueline's beauty, his real concern is to straighten out the twisted tangle of her life — a tangle that is beyond the girl's own power to solve. With Harvey Nolan's grit and money to back him, Oliver sets himself in earnest to reach the heart of the mystery. How he does this is a tale to hold the reader breathless to the end.

The Mysterious Miss Morrisot

Valentine
Williams

REFERENCE LIBRARY * HOUGHTON MIFFLIN CO. * BOSTON, MASS. *
Archive
Collection
This book may not leave the Offices
and if borrowed must be returned within 7 days *

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024 with funding from
Boston Public Library

https://archive.org/details/mysteriousmissmo00will

BOOKS BY
VALENTINE WILLIAMS

THE MAN WITH THE CLUB FOOT
THE YELLOW STREAK
ISLAND GOLD
THE THREE OF CLUBS
CLUBFOOT THE AVENGER
THE RED MASS
MR. RAMOSI
THE KEY MAN
THE EYE IN ATTENDANCE
THE CROUCHING BEAST
THE KNIFE BEHIND THE CURTAIN
THE MYSTERIOUS MISS MORRISOT

THE MYSTERIOUS MISS MORRISOT

THE MYSTERIOUS MISS MORRISOT

BY

VALENTINE WILLIAMS

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1930

COPYRIGHT, 1930, BY VALENTINE WILLIAMS

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO REPRODUCE
THIS BOOK OR PARTS THEREOF IN ANY FORM

The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE · MASSACHUSETTS
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

TO

ROSE AND ADOLF

CONTENTS

I. THE GREAT VICTOR 3

II. MRS. HERSENT'S GUEST 11

III. TEA WITH MOUSIE HERSENT 17

IV. JACQUELINE AGAIN 23

V. A PECUNIARY TRANSACTION AND WHAT CAME OF IT 28

VI. MOONLIGHT ON THE CROISETTE 34

VII. REFLECTIONS OF A YOUNG MAN IN THE DAWN 39

VIII. IN WHICH A GREEN DIVING-CAP EMERGES FROM THE OCEAN 46

IX. CHEZ MORRISOT'S 51

X. AT THE VILLA CÉLANDINE 63

XI. RIBEIRA 68

XII. BEHIND THE COLUMNS 74

XIII. MADAME'S FROCK COMES HOME 77

XIV. MOUSIE HERSENT VERIFIES AN OLD ADAGE 83

XV. ... AND HEARS A HOME TRUTH 88

XVI. THE GREAT VICTOR LOOKS THE OTHER WAY 93

XVII. JACQUELINE HAS A CALLER 99

XVIII. TWO LETTERS 106

XIX. INTRODUCING, SOMEWHAT UNEXPECTEDLY, MR. DAN O'HALLORAN 113

XX. HARVEY NOLAN 122
XXI. THE GLIMPSES OF THE MOON 131
XXII. PORTRAIT OF A MILLIONAIRE 140
XXIII. JACK MAKES A NEW FRIEND ... AND MEETS AN OLD ONE 152
XXIV. THE SUMMONS 159
XXV. THE MAN AT THE CAFÉ 169
XXVI. IN WHICH MR. HARVEY NOLAN ASKS FOR HIS TROUSERS 178
XXVII. LIGHT ON RIBEIRA 184
XXVIII. BRONSTEIN 194
XXIX. CHECK 202
XXX. THE SCENT GROWS WARM 209
XXXI. IN WHICH AN OLD FRIEND OF OLIVER'S LETS IN SOME MORE LIGHT 217
XXXII. JACK ENCOUNTERS A PROBLEM 226
XXXIII. RIBEIRA'S VISITOR 234
XXXIV. AT LES CHARMETTES 244
XXXV. THE CLUE 255
XXXVI. THE SECRET OF THE GARAGE 263
XXXVII. THE WOLF AT BAY 271
XXXVIII. THE KILL 278
XXXIX. ENVOI 285
XL. THE MYSTERY OF B THIRTY-EIGHT 294

THE MYSTERIOUS MISS MORRISOT

THE MYSTERIOUS MISS MORRISOT

CHAPTER I

THE GREAT VICTOR

THE velvety Riviera dark dropped swiftly down upon Cannes.

Up the slope of the Casino approach an endless chain of limousines came crawling, with side-lamps that picked out of the surrounding obscurity vivid patches of red and pink and green among the geraniums and verdant bushes of the gardens. The uniformed silhouettes of chauffeurs and chasseurs, passing to and fro before the glowing Casino windows, appeared against the moving background of cars. At the foot of the ramp an immense phalanx of automobiles already flanked the lapping harbour with its forest of slender masts melting into the mauve dusk.

Here and there the brilliant beam of a headlight wheeled erratically out of the gathering night. Far along the edging of palms marking the Croisette the blurred lamps of the cortège were strung. A klaxon grunted from time to time, strident, impatient. *Hurry, hurry*, the horns seemed to protest. *We bear the idle, and they cannot bear to sit still while there is more nothing to be done.* Against the low wall of the Casino gardens the waiting chauffeurs lolled, smoking and gossiping in the lingo, fashioned out of half a dozen tongues, of the Riviera garages, stamping their feet and beating their arms against their smart tunics in the chilly February air. Above this scene of bustle, the Casino, squat and flat and white, like any Oriental pavilion, and blazing with light from every orifice, crouched upon its little eminence, waiting.

Women were pouring into the Casino. The so-called Baccarat Entrance, on the garden side, swarmed with them. By every car they arrived, to be swallowed up by the rumbling turnabout door and shot forth on the other side into the seething throngs within the brilliantly lit vestibule.

Women.

Old women and young women; women plain or beautiful, *chic* or shabby; thin women, almost all, but fat women, too; women of many races, Gentile and Jew, Aryan and Semite, Nordic and Latin; chattering, laughing, arguing, expostulating, gesticulating, past the impassive, deferential doorman they swept in an unending stream, with gleam of furs and glint of gems under the milky arcs, leaving the winter gloaming vibrant and all perfumed with their subtle fragrance.

Where the vestibule, making a dog-leg, came to a dead-end, and in front of a door that banged incessantly amid a frenzied gabble of French, a small fat man stood, rocking on his heels. His elegance was extreme. A morning coat, of some original and no doubt very exclusive texture, closely moulded his plumpness; his grey Ascot four-in-hand was exquisitely tied, the black pearl pin lustrous and of impeccable authenticity. With his narrow eyes, heavily bagged, and his shining bald pate, he had the smooth, hairless aspect of a lizard. But the mouth was good-humoured and sensitive. His hands, which he had thrust under the tails of his coat, were small and soft and beautifully shaped. To look at, he might have been a successful actor-manager or a fashionable portrait-painter. In actual fact, he was a dressmaker.

For this was the great Victor, and his cup of happiness was brimming over. It was mid-February, the height of the Cannes season. A thousand women had accepted his invitation — admission by card only and tea supplied — to view his Summer Collection. But it seemed to Victor that at least five hundred more had presented themselves.

From where he stood, behind the band platform, through a half-drawn curtain, he could survey the spacious Restaurant des Ambassadeurs. Already the great room was densely crowded, yet the flood of women continued to flow unabated down the shallow steps leading from the vestibule. The tea-tables were elbow to elbow, from the front rank set about the dance-floor, which an hydraulic device had now raised a few feet above the level of the room for the presentation of the models, right back to the window embrasures, where the spectators, mounted on chairs, clustered like flies. Already above the dance-floor the spotlights were hissing. The air was stifling, and the sounds of a Babel of tongues almost outtoned the plaintive music of the tango band in gaucho dress which played alternately with the American jazz orchestra in smart, snuff-brown jackets and white flannel trousers.

As the loud buzz of talk rose to his ears, and his eye, flitting rapidly from table to table, picked out one celebrity or notoriety after the other, the great Victor thrilled to the realization of the soundness of his judgment. Within the brief period of five years he had uplifted the business he had founded to the pinnacle of international fame. Victor's was now reckoned with the half-dozen Paris *couturiers* who really count, whose standing is so high that their models are guarded from the copyist by every process known to law, whose name alone enjoys such prestige that there is a brisk underhand traffic in the name-tabs surreptitiously snipped from their creations by unscrupulous lady's-maids, cloakroom women and underlings of that ilk.

At the sight of the women swarming into the restaurant, his heart swelled with pride. Ah, before he was done he would have them all — all these gaudy birds of paradise — eating from his hand! One might have said that the visitors' lists had emptied titled names by the column into the Restaurant des Ambassadeurs that afternoon. Not that titles mattered greatly any more, in these democratic, post-war days. But they were useful bait for the rich: the Americans, the South Americans, the Greeks and Levantines — this mass of mixed currency which keeps the rue de la Paix above water.

Not that the great Victor cared much about money, save as a means of appeasing his backers. He would scarcely make a profit on the first year's turn-over at Cannes. But he was prepared for that. His object was to establish the Victor *cachet*, to bring about in the minds of the wealthy cosmopolitan crowd an instinctive association of ideas between the name of Victor's and the standard of absolute, flawless *chic*.

An excitable young man in a fantastically waisted morning coat pranced in from the band platform. 'Monsieur, monsieur,' he jabbered in mincing tones, 'it's a tragedy! The programmes have given out!'

His employer waved him aside. 'See Mademoiselle

Jacqueline,' he ordered curtly, and relapsed into his reverie.

Gloatingly, his mind was slipping back down the vista of the years. He saw himself, a traveller in millinery, wearing his shabby clothes threadbare on the hard seats of third-class carriages, dragging his sample cases and wickerwork trunks in station flies round the dingy streets of small provincial towns. When he could stand the life no longer — the deadly sameness of musty *Hôtels de commerce*, of the company of his fellow drummers at the *tables d'hôte* — he had thrown up a safe job to starve in Paris, trying to sell his designs.

A scraggy little girl in the brown smock of the fitting-room humbly touched his sleeve. 'Oh, please, monsieur,' she exclaimed breathlessly, 'Monsieur Claude says the maître d'hôtel is asking...'

A white hand cut her short. 'Don't bother me, my child,' said the great Victor loftily. 'See Mademoiselle Jacqueline!'

Behind him the door flapped incessantly. *Vendeuses*, all dressed alike in smart fawn jumper-suits, came and went. Each time the door opened, it disclosed a glimpse of elegant, silk-stockinged figures in various stages of undress, against what to the lay eye seemed a helpless confusion of robes and furs and hats, and released, together with a flurry of excitable talk, a blend of warm and vaguely alluring odours, a fusion of perfume, of face-powder and cosmetics.

An emaciated woman, with sunken eyes and a face so fallen in and raddled that one thought instinctively of an exhumed body, now approached him. She addressed the modiste in the tone of one accustomed to command. 'My dear Victor,' she said in French, 'you positively must help me. My niece and her husband have arrived unexpectedly from Paris and I want two more invitation cards.'

The great man bowed effusively. 'Madame la Duchesse,' he replied in his fluty voice, 'I am desolated, but I have given away the last of my own tickets. If Madame la Duchesse would be kind enough to have a word with Mademoiselle Jacqueline...'

'And how,' demanded the lady severely, 'do you expect me to find Mademoiselle Jacqueline in this mob?'

At that moment a willowy young person, extremely *soignée* in the fawn sports suit which all the *vendeuses* at Victor's wore, appeared round the turn of the vestibule. A posse of women, clamorous, expostulatory, trailed at her heels. With an amused air of helplessness, she turned her small head of wavy auburn hair from this side to that as she sought to elude them. Victor crooked a finger at her and at once she broke away.

'Two tickets for Madame la Duchesse here,' he said.

'Bien, monsieur.' Her fingers looped a refractory strand of hair back behind one small ear. 'If Madame la Duchesse will come this way...'

Her voice was pleasantly musical, but crisp and businesslike. Her hands were full of papers, and half a dozen people accosted her as she moved off with her charge. But she remained unflustered: the surge of the crowd touched her not at all.

Victor rubbed his hands together as she disappeared. This excellent Jacqueline, *cette brave petite* Jack! Competent, that was the word. That was where her English blood came out. As he watched her little head, so proudly borne, disappear in the throng, he reflected that, of all his staff, only she had encouraged him in his great Cannes project. He had got into the way — well, not of consulting her exactly, but of sounding her about his plans. For her age — she was only twenty-one — he found her amazingly serious-minded and level-headed, unlike any other girl in his employ, besides being, as he believed, devoted to him. And she never cringed to him, as the others did. If asked for her opinion, she gave it, unafraid. Thus, when once, under the influence of the Russian invasion of Paris, he had unfolded to her his idea for following the lead of some of his rivals and of launching out in 'barbaresque' designs, she had dumbfounded him by roundly declaring that he must be mad.

He smiled approvingly to himself at the thought of her, smoothly superintending every detail of the afternoon's display. He admired in her the qualities he lacked himself. He knew himself to be incapable of organizing anything, even his own affairs, as his backers continually lamented; and on occasions such as this, when his French staff invariably lost their heads, he had got into the way of leaving things to Jacqueline. She had taken charge of the entire arrangements for that day's show, drawing up the list of invitations, interviewing the Casino authorities, consulting the orchestra leaders about the music. She had set the official hour of the tea at four-thirty, but had promised him that she would have the guests in their places by five. She would keep her word, too. Jacqueline never let him down.

A handsome brunette in the fawn livery of the *vendeuses* hurried up to him. 'About the chiffon velvet robe, patron,' she said; 'is Maud to wear the turban with it?'

'See Jacqueline, my good Dolores,' he answered abstractedly, still busy with his thoughts.

The girl pursed up her lips. 'Madame Monnet' —

Madame Monnet was the manageress — 'and I have looked for her everywhere. But, mon Dieu, in this crush...'

The great Victor descended to earth.

'Oh, very well...'

He lingered only to bestow a parting glance upon the vibrant assemblage in the restaurant, then turned and led the way towards the dressing-rooms. His companion's magnificent eyes flashed spitefully. 'Toujours cette Anglaise!' she muttered as she followed deferentially in his wake.

CHAPTER II

MRS. HERSENT'S GUEST

UNDER the bright lights of the glass canopy stretched above the Baccarat Entrance, the fumes from innumerable exhausts eddied bluely. A station taxi that halted unduly while its fare, a blond and supremely nonchalant young man, paid the driver, was greeted with a frantic outburst of honking. It was as though all these Rolls-Royces and Hispano-Suizas and Isottas resented the intrusion of this mere hireling, their lowly colleague.

The doorman discreetly touched his cap to the new arrival. Till then, to the preoccupied horde pressing through the door, the gold-laced menial had seemed a mere appurtenance of their surroundings, as impersonal as the mat beneath their feet. But of a sudden there was the sense of human contact set up between the Casino and its visitors as the janitor murmured a cordial 'Bonsoir, Monsieur Royce!'

A charming smile acknowledged the man's greeting, 'Hullo, Jules. I haven't seen you since Deauville. I'm here at last, you see.'

'Monsieur has let himself be waited for...'

'I've been over at Monte Carlo.' He nodded brightly and the turnabout door gathered him up in its maw.

Within, the vestibule was frantic with hubbub. Screens had been drawn across the shallow and stately flight of steps descending to the Restaurant des Ambassadeurs, and here, in a restless, rather peevish queue, hundreds of women — or so it appeared to the bewildered gaze of the newcomer — fidgeted. The queue serpented its ragged way clear across the lobby as far as the opulent showcases flanking the control desks of the gaming-rooms. At intervals, a male silhouette, bored and resigned, showed itself in the line; but the women outnumbered the men by ten to one.

Just inside the door an usher in sober black shepherded the flock with the same air of aloofness which the doorman displayed. 'Mesdames, avançons, s'il vous plaît!' he chanted mechanically, only breaking off to dispose of constant enquiries with the invariable formula: 'The pink cards to the left; the white cards round the corner on the other side.'

But he, too, relaxed at the sight of the young man. His rather wooden features outlined a brief smile. 'Tiens, Monsieur Royce...'

'What's the crush, Dupont?' demanded the other, slipping off his overcoat. 'Has Mary Pickford arrived in Cannes, or what?'

The usher laughed noiselessly — all service in the Corniche tradition is muted. 'One would say so. No, Monsieur Royce. It is only that Victor shows this afternoon his Summer Collection.'

'Oh, Lord!' the young man groaned; 'a dress parade, what? But I'm supposed to be having tea here with Mrs. Hersent. You know Mrs. Hersent, Dupont?'

'Certainly. No doubt madame has reserved a table.'

'Do you know whether she's arrived yet?'

'I can't say.' He turned aside to a girl in a beige jumper suit, who, hatless, was standing apart from the crowd. 'Dites, Mademoiselle Jacqueline, you know Madame Hersent?'

'Her table is waiting.' She was now free to look at the usher and from him to his companion. Her gaze rested on the young man's face, but it was only for an instant. She consulted a list in her hand. 'Madame Hersent's table is No. 12, on the dance-floor. If monsieur wished to go in...'

She addressed him in French and he replied, with easy fluency, in the same language. 'It doesn't matter. If Mrs. Hersent hasn't arrived, I think I'll wait for her.' With that he smiled agreeably at the girl and made his way through the press in the direction of the vestiaires.

The girl followed him with her eyes. 'Who's that, do you know, Monsieur Dupont?' she asked the usher.

'An Englishman,' rejoined the other severely, as who should say, 'A barbarian.' 'His name is Royce.'

Mademoiselle Jacqueline gave an almost imperceptible nod. 'A journalist, isn't he?'

'He pays for his entrée to the baccarat,' was the succinct rejoinder. 'But he might still be a journalist. Didn't you see him here last year? And at Deauville in the summer?'

She shook her auburn crop. 'This is the first year I've been to Cannes. And I've never been to Deauville...'

But at this point their conversation was interrupted by an importunate lady who, being the last to arrive, nevertheless wished to take her place at the head of the queue.

At the cloakroom counter, where the electric hoists were busy clanking down their loads of furs and other costly garments to their appointed parking-place in the bowels of the Casino, the woman relieved Royce of his hat and overcoat with a welcoming smile. At the *contrôle* of the gaming-rooms the flinty faces of the officials softened as they made out his subscription card. A superintendent of the tables going on duty nodded to him in the somewhat furtive manner peculiar to those important functionaries of Casinodom. The whole staff, in short, down to the very lackey at the gaming-rooms door, had a word and a smile of welcome for the new arrival. To anybody accustomed to the rather frigid politeness displayed by the Casino officials towards the public at large, it must have appeared that 'Monsieur Royce' was indeed an old habitué.

By the time the young man had got back to the vestibule, the queue was moving forward. Behind the ushers taking the invitation cards at the opening between the screens, he perceived the girl he had seen before, the centre of a whirlpool of determined and, for the most part, rather irritable women.

Everybody seemed to know her, he noticed. Most of the women called her by her name. It was 'Mademoiselle Jacqueline' here and 'Mademoiselle Jacqueline' there, in every imaginable accent from Sioux Falls to Beirut. He remarked with what unshakable calm she rode the storm, smoothing away difficulties, appeasing ruffled tempers, with her quick, rather wistful smile, or a little pacificatory gesture of her curiously long, thin hands.

A very unusual, a very charming girl, he decided as he watched her, the sort of girl one would like to be friends with. She wore her little sports suit beautifully. She was well-proportioned, her figure lissom, but lacking the flat-chestedness of so many modern girls, her wrists and ankles delicately wrought. Without having any pretence to classical beauty, her face, through its sheer animation, gave the effect of beauty. She was vital. Her eyes, brown and long-lashed, were clear and sparkling; her teeth were small and milky, like a child's; her skin, which was creamily white, glowed with that sort of subcutaneous flush which is seen in the finest pearls. And her hair was lovely, redly golden, clustering to her head in deep, firm, shining waves. But more than any of these things the young man liked the serene sweetness of her face, enhanced by the upward tilt of the corners of her mouth which, in repose, seemed always about to break into a smile; but also the sense of humour which he thought he could discern in the depths of her golden-brown eyes.

A spark of amusement gleamed there for an instant when, in a momentary lull, she caught the young man's eye. The ghost of a smile flitted across her face and she made a little grimace as though to say: 'Ouf, that's that!' Then she was beset again. But once or twice, as he stood waiting for his hostess, he felt the girl's candid regard upon him. He preened himself a little as a young man will who thinks he has produced an impression....

At last the audience was seated. A hush fell over the restaurant. To the muted strains of a slow *valse* the first of the mannequins had appeared on the stage. The ushers had crowded to the head of the steps to watch. The girl, checking the sheaf of papers in her hand, stood apart in the quiet which had descended upon the vestibule. Suddenly she was aware that some one was beside her. She looked up. It was Victor.

'Everything all right, petite?'

'Yes, patron. There was a little muddle over some of the tables, but we managed to straighten it out. Madame Warschowski was rather cross: some odious Brazilians pinched her table on the dance-floor...'

The great man rolled up his eyes. 'Oh, la, la!'

The girl laughed. She had a pleasant laugh, a sort of full-throated croon. 'She did make rather a fuss. But I was able to turn the others out...'

'How did you manage?'

'I told the rastaquouères I'd give them a table next to the King of Sweden.'

Her employer seemed to bound in the air. 'What! Is *he* here? Why wasn't I told? I should have been there to receive him...'

The girl gave a little gurgle of amusement. 'Of course he isn't here. But he might have been. He's at Nice, isn't he?'

Victor's soft hand went out and dealt her cheek two friendly little pats. 'You've done very well, very well,' he told her. 'Stay!' He stopped her as she turned to go. 'What are you doing with yourself to-night?'

She hesitated. 'I'd promised the Marchese di Scutari to dine with him at the Grelot. But if there was anything you wanted, patron...'

'Go and enjoy yourself,' he said. He chuckled. 'Little snob, you and your marcheses!' He administered a little friendly push. 'Be off with you now!'

She laughed and sped away.

CHAPTER III

TEA WITH MOUSIE HERSENT

THE spotlights hissed and in their incandescent glare the mannequins succeeded one another upon the little upraised stage. The enormous restaurant was a mass of white faces turned upwards with a continual flutter of orange, like poppies on a chalk cliff stirred by the wind, as the audience turned the leaves of the elaborate tangerine-and-gold catalogue of Victor's 'collection.' The crisp beat of the jazz orchestra was considerably ruffled by the rattle of teacups and the swelling murmur of voices, only interrupted when a more than usually attractive creation sent a sort of gasp of delight rippling round the room. At such a moment the drone of indifferent talk would melt into a series of enraptured exclamations, as all over the packed restaurant women rose up, terrible in their eagerness, craning their necks and straining forward, as though a magnet were drawing them from their seats towards the small platform where under the blinding arcs a lonely figure languorously posed.

Mrs. Hersent's table was in a favoured position, the front row. But the lady made little account of this signal tribute to her importance as one of the great Victor's most valued customers. She was conversing with great earnestness with the young man at her side, having but a distracted eye for the series of exquisite gowns paraded before her. Indeed, of the three persons at the table, only one appeared to be really engrossed by the spectacle. This was Miss Fitch, Mrs. Hersent's companion, an indomitably cheerful person of uncertain age but transparent respectability, who, in a terrible black hat, as full of angles as a Lancer headdress, which had lately been discarded unworn by her employer as 'too trying,' and a black tailor-made of the year before last, similarly a refugee from Mrs. Hersent's extensive wardrobe, wore the vaguely flash air of a reformed character who should have donned her original costume to emerge from a home for fallen women.

From discretion, Miss Fitch kept her long and bony back resolutely turned upon her employer. For Mrs. Hersent was conducting a conversation with her neighbour in a confidential undertone, and it ill behoves a companion to eavesdrop, particularly with a lady of such uncertain temper as Mrs. Hersent.

'Olly mustn't be a wilful boy,' Mrs. Hersent was saying, her thick lips, smeared with scarlet, inclined towards the young man's ear. 'He must leave that horrid Monte Carlo and come and stay with Mousie. He shall be Mousie's secretary and do all her nasty bills an' everything. He shall have his own suite of rooms at the Villa, and keep poor Mousie company a little. Olly and Mousie'll go dancing together, and sometimes Mousie'll give Olly some mille notes to go gambling with her at the Casino. Such fun! Olly, dear, you must come.'

Oliver Royce was silent. Leaning back in his chair, a cigarette between his fingers, he was watching one of the models advancing across the platform. She was a roguish, merry little creature, her eyes, large and childlike, sparkling with mischief, her rosy lips pursed up in a cherubic smile, her exquisite little figure nicely moulded in an absurdly fantastic golf-suit with the shortest of skirts and a gaudy scarf knotted about her young, slender throat.

Quite obviously, she was enjoying every minute of her brief success as she tripped across the stage.

Here was reality, he pondered, the reality of youth, beauteous, graceful, exuberant, as contrasted with the counterfeit at his side. Mrs. Hersent, with her peroxide hair, her lifted face, her flapper frocks, and her titled friends, was all false. At her age he could not guess, of course; nowadays women were ageless: not their birth certificates, but the beauty surgeon dated them. When she had been pointed out to him one gala evening at the Café de Paris, Royce, from across the length of the restaurant, had taken her for a youngish woman. It was, indeed, not until they had begun to go about together, and the dawn, filtering through the curtains of the Sporting or a night-club, had shown him the weariness of her eyes, the drag about the mouth, that he realized the truth.

Of her antecedents he knew nothing; but then who asks for social references on the Riviera? Sufficient that she was wealthy, with a Rolls, a beautiful villa on the Route de Fréjus at Cannes, another outside Paris, and that she entertained lavishly. He could see she was plebeian. Her coarse, heavy features proclaimed it, and her massive legs incased in the thinnest of gossamer stockings and her fat feet crushed into the most expensive of hand-made shoes. There was no doubt about her being English, and he thought, from certain provincialisms which her speech retained, that she came from the Midlands. He could imagine without difficulty in her past life some stolid manufacturer, sitting down in his shirt-sleeves to high tea, addressing her as 'Mother.'

Her fishlike eyes, sluggish and self-indulgent, but now searching his face with an archness which was grotesque and horrible, seemed to demand an answer. He turned and looked at her, coldly appraising. In his present frame of mind nothing seemed to matter very greatly. As he contemplated her through the spindrift cloud of his cigarette, he reflected that there had probably been two women in the person of Mrs. Hersent: the wife, a brunette, perhaps, or even grey-haired, vegetating, placid and dowdy, in some English provincial centre, metamorphosed by wealth and the rupture of old ties into this, the smart Riviera widow, fawned upon by maîtres d'hôtel and dressmakers, a figure of note among the rag-tag and bob-tail foreign nobility who sponge upon the rich British and Americans on the Côte d'Azur.

She was in the swim now. A Russian Grand Duke had lunched with her, and though he had subsequently 'touched' her for five thousand francs' worth of tickets for a dubious Russian charity, the social prestige accruing from being able to bob to an authentic pre-war Imperial Highness in public — in the Casino bar or at the Polo — was cheap at the price. She was already on familiar terms with certain members of the London night-club nobility and their less patrician parasites among the English visitors to Cannes, who would go anywhere to be amused or to be entertained at somebody else's expense. Mrs. Hersent soon made the discovery that in these promiscuous circles the use of Christian names or nicknames is universal. She did not fancy her own first name, which was Ada, and plumped for a nickname in place of it — a nickname, she decided, created a sort of English country-house background, suggesting intimacy with the hunting and racing set. Fitchie, as she called her long-suffering companion, had responded to her employer's playful propensity for indulging in baby talk, by inventing the nickname of 'Mousie' as a term of endearment to be used between them. To Oliver Royce and some half a hundred others, accordingly, 'Mousie Hersent' Mrs. Hersent became.

The roguish little mannequin had made a hit. The great restaurant reverberated with applause as she made a charming exit. Perfunctorily pounding her plump and beringed hands together, Mrs. Hersent whispered on in Royce's ear.

'Why don't you say something, instead of staring at those stupid women on the stage? A lot of peacocks, I call them!'

'It's tremendously good of you, Mousie,' he said slowly, 'but just now I'm undecided about my plans. I don't seem able to make up my mind what to do.'

'Then I'll make it up *for* you. Olly, you *must* come to the Villa.' Her voice grew fretful, her mouth peevish. 'It's time there was a man there to look after things. The servants rob me. That butler of mine is a regular thief. You speak French so beautifully, you could keep them in order. And I'm nervous with all the jewellery I've got in the house after that frightful murder at La Napoule. In half the villas where they have robberies I believe the servants are in league with the thieves. Olly, you've just got to come. Of course, I shall give you a salary and all that... But I'll see you at lunch to-morrow, eh?'

'I'm not sure,' he replied waveringly. 'I may go back to Monte to-night. It all depends. I'll ring up if I'm coming...'

'I shall expect you,' she said poutingly. 'And bring your luggage with you.'

To this he made no further answer, but, with a comradely nod to Miss Fitch, began to pick his way through the press of tables to the exit. The stairs leading to the restaurant were thronged with spectators, but, beyond, the vestibule was comparatively unencumbered. By the entrance to the gaming-rooms he paused and, taking a leather note-case, gold-edged, from his pocket, opened it and mustered its contents. A thousand-franc note and a hundred-franc note were all it contained. The thousand-franc note he extracted and stowed it away in his waistcoat. Then, putting up the note-case again, with a rapid step he passed through into the gaming-rooms.

CHAPTER IV

JACQUELINE AGAIN

MAC, barman at the Grelot, latest and smartest of Cannes 'dancings' (which is what the French think the Anglo-Saxon calls a restaurant where one dances), was an alien on the Azure Coast. No allusion is thereby made to his nationality, which, as befits a mixer of Riviera cocktails, despite his name, was obscure, but merely to the fact that he was not an integral part of the great Cannes-Deauville circuit. This, for the benefit of the uninitiated, is the system which in early spring transfers the whole of the Casino staff, the personnel of sundry hotels, restaurants, and American bars, and a host of camp-followers in the shape of dressmakers, barbers, manicurists, beauty specialists, and even cab-drivers, from Cannes to Deauville, and in late autumn brings them back to Cannes again. Mac's particular beat was Aix-les-Bains in summer and Algiers in winter, and only the unusually tempting offer of the Grelot accounted for his presence in foreign territory.

But the ways of habitués of establishments of the Grelot cast are international. There is a fashion of entering a restaurant which tells maîtres d'hôtel and barmen, who know about these things, exactly what to make of the newcomer. And so when, about the hour of ten on the evening after Victor's dress parade, a slim, impassive young man in a black felt hat and a well-cut dinner suit strolled into the Grelot, Mac, who, from his strategic position behind the bar along one side of the small vestibule, was well placed to survey all arrivals and departures, after one quick look out of his impassive but watchful eyes, sidled expectantly along the shining counter.

He had not seen the young man at the Grelot before. But certain indications proclaimed him a client of mark, a *rara avis* of breeding and refinement in the international menagerie of hicks, parvenus, and wild men of Borneo, who, as the night advanced, would presently foregather at Mac's brass rail, or stream past him to and from the restaurant. The barman's trained eye fastened upon the rather disdainful nod with which, from the doorway, the newcomer acknowledged the greeting of Major Wetherton, the English punter, who was drinking with two others at the bar, and the calm assurance of the glance he proceeded to cast round the low-roofed and garishly decorated restaurant.

At the end of the vestibule, tables framed an oval of gleaming dance-floor and overflowed into sundry little alcoves heavily vaulted in the old Russian style. A band in Caucasian dress was softly playing Toselli's 'Serenade,' and most of the tables were occupied with people dining. Hangings and enormous globular lamp-shades of vivid orange and, on the walls, brightly painted groups of Russian peasants enjoying life in a very *démodé* manner, as things are in Russia to-day, imparted the requisite touch of exoticism indispensable to such resorts. The place rang with cheerful dining sounds, blended with voices discreetly muted to the scale that goes with preposterous prices and a wealthy clientèle.

A young girl in a *diamanté* evening gown, who was dining with a man at one of the tables on the dance-floor, momentarily arrested the newcomer's bored and uninterested survey. Her back was to the bar so that her face was not in view, but the new arrival fixed his gaze upon the small head of rippling coppery hair as though it were familiar to him. Her vis-à-vis was an olive-skinned individual with a gardenia in his buttonhole, whose glossy black hair gleamed like the brilliant silk facings of his immaculate dinner coat.

'Hey, Oliver!'

The newcomer turned round to the bar. The man who had nodded to him on his entrance waved a friendly hand, at the same time patting the high stool which stood vacant beside him. He was a furtive-looking gentleman, whose evening clothes, like his face, revealed signs of wear.

'Hullo, there,' he said as the young man approached the bar; 'I want you to meet a couple o' friends of mine. The Vicomte de Cabriac' — he indicated a young and athletic-looking Frenchman who was eating prawns out of a saucer — 'and Aldo here' — at which a pallid youth with very bright eyes and a chalky face bowed effusively. 'Boys, this is Oliver Royce.'

'And how's Monte been treating you, boy?' asked his friend.

'Rotten,' was the curt answer.

'So you're going to give Cannes a chance. Well, you never know. When did you get here?'

'Only this afternoon.'

'Had a toddle round yet?'

Royce nodded curtly.

'Do yourself any good?'

The young man shook his head.

'Who's the girl in white sitting with that dark man who looks like a Spaniard, do you know?' Royce said to Wetherton. 'Do you see the one I mean?'

'You beat me,' his friend rejoined, gazing in the direction the other indicated. 'I can tell you who she's with, though. He calls himself the Marchese di Scutari, but *I* think he's a crook.'

Royce ordered another round. 'But who's the girl?' he persisted.

'The Vicomte here will tell you,' Wetherton replied. 'Cab. knows every skirt on the Riviera.' He turned to the Frenchman. 'La petite poule avec Scutari, qui est-ce, dites?'

De Cabriac, tearing a prawn asunder, laughed with a glint of white teeth. 'That's Jacqueline, from Victor's. I thought everybody in Cannes knew Jacqueline.'

'Of course,' said Royce; 'I remember seeing her at the dress show this afternoon. I think she's charming. I'd like to meet her.'

The Vicomte laughed. 'Nothing doing, mon cher monsieur! It's a fact, I assure you. She'll dine with you, she'll sup with you. But it ends there. Un point, c'est tout.'

'What I've told you,' he went on, addressing himself to Wetherton, 'need not deter your friend. He may succeed where others have failed. The more so, as I've heard that our little Jacqueline is partly English. I should have been happy to present him, only' — he consulted his wrist-watch — 'I must trot. The Princess Barbaretta is waiting for me at the Casino to share a bank.'

He nodded round the circle and hurried out. On which the party broke up and Royce went in to dine.

In its casual sweep of the room his eye fell upon the girl from Victor's. Her table was across the dance-floor from his and she was now alone. It struck him that her air was rather disturbed. She scarcely raised her eyes except, from time to time, to look about her restlessly, as though she were waiting for her companion to return.

A moment later he perceived that a little commotion was taking place at the girl's table. The fat maître d'hôtel was there, with a bill on a plate, gesticulating, his voice raised in anger.

CHAPTER V

A PECUNIARY TRANSACTION AND WHAT CAME OF IT

THE girl from Victor's was holding herself very erect, looking up with an indignant expression in her brown eyes into the angry face of the maître d'hôtel. She was cool and self-possessed, but the strained firmness of her adorable mouth did not deceive Royce.

The maître d'hôtel had worked himself up into a fine state of rage. His eyes, his shoulders, his hands were in motion to lend force to the vigour of his harangue. With each denunciatory period he administered a violent and contemptuous jerk to some object on the table, as though to demonstrate on coffee-cups, ash-trays, and table-napkins seriatim the treatment he would like to mete out to the victim of his diatribe.

'Certainly he's gone,' he was booming angrily as Royce approached, 'and he's not coming back, my little one. And you know it!' Demonstration against a fruit-plate. 'I know his sort, allez, and so do you, my girl!' Demonstration against a Perrier bottle. 'You can play your bilking tricks somewhere else. But you're not going out of here until the bill's paid.' Extreme violence upon a coffee-cup. 'Or I send for the police.'

The girl met him with a fine flow of swift, colloquial French.

'And what sort of a fifth-rate boîte do you call this,' she demanded, 'where clients are insulted by the personnel, merely because their host is called away? You say that this gentleman has left the restaurant. Well, you've only got to send the bill to his hotel to-morrow. He's the Marquis de Scutari...'

The maître d'hôtel snorted. 'Marquis?' he repeated derisively. 'Et avec ça!' — as who should say, 'Marquis my foot.' His fat finger tapped the plate. 'This bill has got to be paid now.'

'I tell you I can't pay it,' the girl rejoined. Her voice was a little breathless, and for all her brave front, Royce saw that she was near tears. 'I haven't got as much as 360 francs with me. Send for the manager and I'll explain.'

The maître d'hôtel tapped his snowy shirt-front impressively. 'I, I am the manager. And I tell you I'm not standing for any of your nonsense. Unless...'

At this moment Royce interposed. Brusquely he motioned to the maître d'hôtel to give him the bill. On the instant the oleaginous, crafty face was all obsequiousness. Cringing, the man presented his plate. With his bright smile Royce turned to the girl. 'Vous permettez?' he said and, without waiting for her answer, dropped four 100-franc notes on the plate.

She replied in accentless English; her limpid eyes were surprised, grateful. 'Oh, but why should you? I can't allow it...'

Curtly Royce signed to the maître d'hôtel to take the bill away. 'That's the worst of these mushroom places,' he remarked easily. 'And, anyway, don't you think it's cheap at the price to be rid of this objectionable and rather disgusting-looking individual?'

The maître d'hôtel's froglike eyes bulged, he seemed near choking. He broke into English. 'It was not my fault, m'sieu.' He lowered his voice, addressing himself to Royce, but casting an appealing glance at the girl. 'A man from the Commissariat de Police 'ave bin 'ere. 'E ask for the Marchese de Scutari. But the Marchese, 'e is too kveeck. 'E see the detective first, and when I go to look for him, kveeck, kveeck, 'e is vanishèd. I 'ad to theenk that Mam'selle' — he brandished his hands in a storm of embarrassment — 'enfin, I didn't know. If I 'ad realize that Mam'selle was a friend of M'sieu...'

'Assez!' Royce cut him off sharply. 'I find you wanting in politeness to a lady. Get my change!'

The maître d'hôtel seemed to bound in the air. 'Tout de suite, m'sieu,' he ejaculated deferentially, and scattering, with a wave of his plate, the knot of waiters who had gathered round, plunged away in the direction of the cash-desk.

Royce laughed and sat down. He did not ask permission. Now she was laughing, too. The incident seemed to have established a sort of intimacy between them. But presently she grew serious. For a moment she studied him with enigmatic eyes. He met her scrutiny with an air of mock contrition.

'Why did you do that?' she asked.

He was screwing a cigarette into his holder. 'I don't know. It's a hard world and we have to help one another. Besides, a compatriot in trouble... you're English, aren't you?'

She was still smiling, a little elfin smile. There was the hint of mischief behind the level regard of her big brown eyes as she contemplated him. 'I speak English,' she said.

'You speak it very fluently, and with hardly a trace of accent. Do you know the Riviera well?'

'This is the first year I've been here.'

He laughed. 'I thought so. You want to be careful of casual acquaintances...'

'You mean I shouldn't have let you sit down?

He shook his head at her, laughing. 'I suppose I asked for that. It's easy enough to make mistakes down here. The Riviera sun seems to bring every kind of scoundrel out of the ground just as it breeds maggots in meat...'

She nodded soberly. 'I know. We meet plenty of them in my business...'

'You're at Victor's, aren't you?'

She coloured up deliciously. 'Then you remembered seeing me this afternoon?'

'Of course. You're rather an unforgettable person, you know.'

'Am I?' Throwing back her head, she gurgled with laughter. 'I'm being silly,' she declared at length. 'What was I saying? Oh, yes, about crooks. We're used to them, I can tell you. Especially the women. They're the worst, I always say. I thought this marquis a bit dubious myself. But he talked so interestingly about Italian pictures. And it's such a relief to find anybody here with something in his head besides money and cards and women. By the way, you must tell me where you're staying so that I can send you what you paid for me to-night.'

But he ignored her request. 'Are you interested in painting?'

'I'm interested in anything beautiful,' she answered simply. 'Besides, I'm so ignorant. I'm trying to educate myself.'

He leaned forward. 'One doesn't often meet anybody as attractive as you are who's serious-minded. Has anybody ever told you that you're sheerly lovely?'

She made him a little prim bow. 'Men are always talking nonsense to me,' she replied composedly. 'And I see you're no exception. But I must go home now. I'm a working-woman: I have to keep early hours.'

'Oh,' he cried aghast, 'not yet! You must at least stop and keep me company while I have my dinner.'

'Do you mean to say you haven't dined yet?'

'No...'

'But it's nearly midnight...'

'I'm like the Spaniards: I dine late.'

'You've been gambling, you mean...'

'Well, perhaps a little,' he agreed. 'But I do so hate dining alone. So I put off the evil hour as long as possible. Isn't the service putrid here? I ordered my dinner ages ago. I tell you what, let's dance.'

She had fallen silent, watching him with that curious aloof air of hers which puzzled him. Now she smiled at him, a smile so sweet and kind and gracious that it set his blood hammering. 'I'd love to,' she said.

They went out on the dance-floor. It seethed. It was the bacchanalia of middle and old age. Such rare youth as was there served merely as the fire at which its seniors rekindled for the passing moment their dying flames, faded matrons basking in the arms of bored and reluctant boys, young girls in the doting clasp of senility.

It seemed to Royce, as he took the girl from Victor's in his arms, that she surrendered herself to him with a sort of shy affection. There was a faint fragrance about her — of lavender, or some such simple country essence that put him in mind of an English flower garden — that intoxicated him, that and the perfume of her burnished hair that clustered to her snowy neck like copper asters laid on white velvet. She moved lightly, gracefully, following his steps without effort, and her eyes, raised to his as they chatted, were pleasant and friendly. Nothing of the prude about this girl, he told himself. The Frenchman knew nothing about it: he had taken her the wrong way — Frenchmen were like that. Why, she seemed delighted that he had scraped acquaintance with her: already they were like old friends together. He spoke softly in her ear as they danced, thrilling to see how, with heightening colour and shining eyes, she responded to his mood.

'One would say,' he murmured, 'that all this was expressly designed for us to meet, this ripping band, this perfect floor. I've never known anybody I could dance with as well as I can dance with you.'

'Pooh!' she smiled back at him: 'anybody could dance with you. You know how well you dance.'

'Dancing's not just a matter of steps: it's a question of temperament. Dance with some one you dislike and see the difference. You like me, don't you?'

'Do I?' she said softly.

'Yes,' he replied. 'Do you know, I think we must look very happy dancing together. Like a honeymoon couple. You know, both very self-conscious and writing home picture-postcards of the hotel with an arrow: "This is our room. Alfred is kindness itself."'

She crooned a pleased laugh.

'Your food has arrived,' she interposed. 'Unless you want our fat friend to think you're bilking him, you'd better go and eat.'

CHAPTER VI

MOONLIGHT ON THE CROISETTE

It was two o'clock when the chasseur at the Grelot fetched them a taxi. The night was dark blue, cold and serene, and powdered with stars. After the cloying heat of the restaurant the air was like a draught of iced champagne.

'Let's cool off before I take you home,' Royce suggested. 'We'll run down to the Point of the Croisette, shall we? And look at the islands under the moon.'

Once more she let her questioning gaze rest upon his face. But she did not gainsay him, and he gave the order to the driver. A little embarrassment seemed of a sudden to have fallen between the two of them. She sat rather erect in her corner. He leaned back in his, smoking a cigarette and watching her, while they whirled along over the blackly shining asphalt past the darkened villas.

He did not speak until the taxi halted on the little *place* where, at the end of the promenade, the coast makes a backward bend. Through the open windows of the cab the voice of the ocean, idly gurgling among the battered masonry of the sea-wall, mounted to them out of the velvety night. Like a dark shadow the island of Sainte Marguerite lay on the skyline across the moonlit water. The taxi-driver presented a discreet back. Wise by experience, he switched off his engine and awaited further orders. Silence was all about.

Then Royce spoke. For the first time he called her by her name. 'Jacqueline!' he said.

She turned her head quickly. ‘Oh,’ she cried with a little fluttering gasp, ‘you know my name?’

He laughed. ‘Everybody in Cannes knows Jacqueline, from Victor’s. But I suppose I ought to introduce myself...’

‘There’s no need for that,’ she answered — rather soberly, as he thought.

‘Do you mean to say you know my name?’

‘Yes, Mr. Royce,’ she said.

He leaned forward eagerly. ‘I say, how on earth...’

‘If everybody in Cannes knows Jacqueline, as you say, perhaps Jacqueline knows everybody,’ was the cryptic reply.

‘But I arrived in Cannes only this afternoon,’ he protested. ‘You asked some one — I know, it was Dupont, at the Casino.’

‘I didn’t have to...’

‘You’ve got to explain,’ he said. ‘Have we met before?’

‘If you’ve forgotten...’ She turned her head away.

‘But I could never forget any one as adorable as you,’ he protested. ‘Jacqueline, where did we meet? In Paris, wasn’t it? Or was it Deauville?’

She laughed softly. ‘It’s a shame to tease him,’ she said.

‘You’re only ragging, then?’

She laughed again. ‘Perhaps.’ She leaned forward, and the diamonds in her wrist-watch sparkled in the dim rays of the taximeter lamp. ‘It’s dreadfully late — past two. I must go home. Will you tell the driver? I live at 140 bis, Boulevard Carnot.’

‘A flat, is it?’

But still the young man tarried. ‘I can’t bear the thought of leaving you. You and I are in tune to-night, don't you feel it? One never recaptures such moments again. Besides, I don't want to be alone. You see' — he hesitated — 'when I go home, I've got to decide something — something rather important, and I'm funking it. Do you understand?'

'Oh, yes,' she replied, and her voice had a hard ring. 'I've been through that, too. But never funk a decision. Make up your mind and go through with it: it's the only plan.'

'You sound as if you'd had a hard time, the way you talk...'

In the obscurity within the cab he saw the dim whiteness that was her face turn towards him and knew that her eyes were on him.

'You may well say that,' she answered, but so softly that she might have been talking to herself. Then she laid her hand on his arm. 'Now, please take me home.'

On that, at length, he put his head out of the window and spoke to the chauffeur. They made the return journey in silence. As she sat up, with the stopping of the car, to open the door, his hand clamped itself on hers upon the window-ledge.

'Listen,' he said, speaking rather hoarsely, 'come into my place for a drink. You know what the hotels here are like: they never make a fuss and I'll square the night porter. Jacqueline, dear, I can't let you go just yet: there's so much I want to say to you...'

While he was saying this, she was peering through the glass. 'Where are we?' she demanded rather indignantly. 'This isn't the Boulevard Carnot. Where did you tell the man to drive to?'

'Only half an hour,' he urged, disregarding her question. Now his arms went about her: he was trembling. 'Oh, my dear, can't you see I'm crazy about you?' He attempted to draw her face up to his.

The rays of a street-lamp shone upon the pallid serenity of her face. Her hands, pressed against his chest, kept them apart. She did not struggle, but only gazed at him with a sort of dismay in her limpid eyes.

'Somehow I didn't think you'd spoil our evening,' she said.

He tried to laugh it off. 'Is it spoiling our evening to invite you in for a drink?'

She looked at him fixedly. 'Is that why you want me to come in, Oliver?'

Her unexpected use of his Christian name was an intimate touch that shook his self-assurance. He shrugged his shoulders.

'I apologize,' he made amends coldly and with perfunctory politeness. 'Of course, I didn't know. You see, you're so remarkably well turned out... and all that, I naturally thought...'

She laughed rather bitterly. 'A walking advertisement for Victor's. Even to my hair. Do you really imagine I could afford on my wages to go to Lucien Georges twice a week to have my hair done?'

'And you let men take you about. Even a notorious crook like that fellow to-night...'

'You're entitled to say that,' she told him gravely. 'But the men I go around with know that I'm not to be bought. Men like to be seen out with a well-dressed girl, and Victor encourages it — it's good advertisement.'

Oliver Royce was silent. At last he blurted out, 'I'm sorry, I didn't understand.'

'I'm sorry, too,' she answered. She opened the cab-door. 'This is where you live, isn't it?' She read out the name on the glass shields flanking the entrance. '"Hôtel du Val d'Or." It was sweet of you to come to my rescue. I'll send round the money in the morning.'

'You're a very practical-minded person, aren't you? I suppose you've never been in love?'

'Why do you say that?' She was looking away from him, staring down through the open cab-door upon the deserted sidewalk.

'Well, have you?'

She gave a little quick nod and it seemed to him that she sighed. 'Perhaps. But it was a long time ago.' She turned and put her hand on his arm. 'Now, please, you must let me go.'

On that he got out of the cab, and, standing on the pavement, gave the driver a fifty-franc note. 'You'll let me see you again, won't you?' he said, turning to the girl.

But, leaning out of the other window, she had cried her address to the man and the cab now moved forward. As it shot away from the pavement, the pallid oval of the girl's face was momentarily illuminated by the naked electric light burning over the hotel entrance. To his amazement Royce perceived that her eyes were filled with tears.

CHAPTER VII

REFLECTIONS OF A YOUNG MAN IN THE DAWN

He stood staring in perplexity after the departing cab. Why the tears? She had taken his invitation to come up to his room calmly enough. That she had turned him down did not greatly surprise him: he had met with such feigned reluctance before on the part of little ladies whose bonnets had long since soared high over the mill. She had encouraged him — there was no doubt of that. And she was interested in him, too: — had she not gone to the trouble of finding out his name?

What had made her cry? With her looks and clothes she must be used to such experiences: — indeed, she had confessed as much. De Cabriac had warned him that she was impregnable.

Although the Val d'Or proclaimed itself an hotel, it was neither an hotel nor yet a boarding-house. It was what the French call a *maison meublée* — four floors of bedrooms, without restaurant or any public rooms.

It was here, up four flights of stairs and, therefore, in one of the cheapest bedrooms of the establishment, that Oliver Royce, neighboured on one side by an elderly and extremely dressy Scandinavian, and on the other by an Austrian lawn-tennis professional, nightly housed the hopes and ambitions of his twenty-six years.

From his attic in that still house, looking down over the past as one who from a mountain-top surveys the plain below, it seemed to him that the Oliver Royce of his youth was another person from the young man whom Cannes and Deauville knew. The death of his father had changed his whole life. The image of that quiet, sunburnt soldier, the dear comrade of his boyhood, remained with him as something fine and beautiful and inspiring but irreparably gone, like the memory of a sunset. As a schoolboy, on many nights of that fatal summer of 1916, he had lain awake listening to the ceaseless throbbing of the guns of the Somme. Afterwards it had seemed to him that that faint mutter, night after night, should have swelled to a roar to mark the portentous moment when, in the smoke and flame of daybreak, his greatest hero and staunchest friend had been swallowed up for ever.

The Armistice found him still at school. He was at Oxford, studying for the Diplomatic, when, three years later, Fate struck again. The post-war slump swept away his mother's fortune, and at nineteen he had to leave college and look for work. His mother had never got over the shock of his father's death, and while they were yet discussing ways and means to face the future on her tiny pension, a winter cold developed into pneumonia and she quietly died. Oliver found himself with nine hundred pounds in the bank, three hundred pounds worth of debts, a host of friends, and no job, or any qualifications for a job, save only a good knowledge of French derived from a succession of French governesses in his youth.

Like most undergraduates he had the idea that he might write. In those bleak post-war years jobs were hard to come by, anyway. But he had capital, he told himself: he could afford to wait. And wait he did. His articles, would-be facetious, rather embittered young man stuff, came back with unfailing regularity. When, aware that his stock of money was rapidly dwindling, he sought a staff job in Fleet Street, he was politely but firmly requested to go away and learn his trade.

For all that, he drifted into journalism. With French as his only asset, when London would not have him, he migrated to Paris. The Paris editions of the English and American newspapers gave him his first chance 'on space' and from time to time one or other of the British or American correspondents used him on emergency work. Then the chief correspondent of 'The Day,' the great London newspaper, took him on to replace a man who was ill. It was the day of great newspaper amalgamations, and 'The Day' went the way of the rest. Royce arrived at the office one afternoon to learn that the newspaper was sold and that he could look for another job.

The creak of a board in the corridor caught his ear, followed by the sound of a key being inserted in the door of the adjoining room. That was the old Dane coming in. A little feeling of panic overtook him. Would he, thirty years hence, be like that spruce old man, bravely cutting a dash by day and retiring at night to the shelter of some squalid lodging-house to commune with his poverty behind locked doors, washing out his handkerchiefs and socks in the basin.

He realized now that, if he had stuck it out, he would have fitted himself somewhere in journalism. His experience of life had taught him that things have a habit of adjusting themselves under the pressure of tenacity. But a fabulous run of luck at the gaming-tables at Deauville (where he was filling a temporary assignment to do social notes for the Hearst press) after six months of heartbreak looking for work in Paris and London, had suddenly relieved him of all financial cares for a twelvemonth.

He was not a gambler, he could honestly tell himself. He did not play for the zest of the thing, but to get a living. Hitherto, it had seemed so easy. One had only to keep cool and know when to leave off. It was a pleasanter life than free-lance journalism and, in his experience, much more remunerative. Or so it had seemed. Only now he realized that to have kept himself out of his winnings during the past five years he must have had more than his share of good luck.

A cigarette between his lips, he lounged over to the table where he had dumped the contents of his pockets as he undressed. He gleaned into a heap the loose notes and small change that lay there and raked them over with a listless finger. The expensive, gold-edged wallet was empty now, and he transferred to it the single fifty-franc note the heap contained, the highest denomination there. The balance amounted to forty-seven francs and fifty centimes.

Beyond the open window a solitary palm in the gardens shivered against the spangled background of the night. The young man humped his shoulders and deliberately spoke his thought to the moon.

'Bloody fool!' he said.

Broke! Up against it! And he had pitched his last chance away without having had as much as a run for his money. A single five-hundred-franc note had stood between him and utter destitution! — utter destitution or a certain alternative which kept thrusting its bogey countenance out of the background of his mind. And its face was Mousie Hersent's.

Deauville and, in September, Biarritz had put him well in funds to confront winter on the Riviera. Monte Carlo, as usual, was his jumping-off place. After settling his liabilities at Monte Carlo, accordingly, he found himself with an odd twelve hundred francs with which to make a fresh start at Cannes.

He was fully aware that he had let his funds run much too low ever to make good at Cannes, except by a Heaven-sent reversal of fortune. That was Mousie Hersent's doing, blast her! For more than a month she had been pestering him to come and stay with her. He did not want to stay with her. The mere idea of it poisoned the very thought of Cannes for him. It was all right to be her guest at the large parties she gave at the Café de Paris, at the Réserve de Beaulieu, or at the Restaurant des Ambassadeurs at Cannes. But to take her out for a tête-à-tête evening, as she was constantly proposing, to be her guest at the Villa Célandine — no.

He would have moved to Cannes a month before only for the nauseating glitter in Mousie Hersent's eye whenever the subject was mentioned. But in the end he lost his nerve. His run of bad luck had broken his spirit. He found himself unable to endure the thought of being cast without money upon the mercy of the dour Monégasque who kept his hotel. It was not hard to persuade himself that at Cannes his luck must change: if the process were slow, he told himself, he might perhaps accept Mousie's hospitality for a week and save his hotel bill. Now Cannes had failed him and his own vanity had done the rest. The Villa Célandine, and that girlish ogle that sent cold shivers up and down his spine, were waiting...

At that moment Destiny knocked at the door. As a rule it is the merciful habit of Providence to withhold from us poor humans the power of recognizing the grim goddess when she raps at our portals. But to Oliver Royce it seemed that Fate itself had called upon him when, in answer to his 'Entrez!' Joseph, the Val d'Ors, dispirited factotum, appeared, holding forth a letter. For the letter was addressed to 'Monsieur Royce' in an enormous, sprawling hand recognizable a yard away.

'A chauffeur left it this evening,' the house familiar explained, blinking his red-rimmed eyes. 'I forgot to give it to m'sieu just now. As it's marked "Urgent" I thought I'd better bring it up.'

Royce took the letter. 'Wait!' he said as he broke the seal. His eye ran over the few lines the note contained. Very deliberately, he tore the letter across and across again until it was shredded into little bits, which he dropped into the waste-paper basket.

'A car is calling for me at a quarter to one,' he told the domestic. 'Have my things in the hall by half-past twelve and tell them in the office I want my bill.'

'Bien, m'sieu...'

The man turned to go. Royce, who was staring out of the window, turned about. 'Stop!' he said. 'How much is this room?'

'Forty francs, m'sieu.'

'And the petit déjeûner?'

'Ten francs, m'sieu!'

Royce went to the table and scraped up the pile of paper and coins that lay there.

'Hold up your apron, Joseph,' he commanded. The man obeyed and the other emptied his hands into the rough sacking.

'That's for you,' said Royce, 'in case I don't see you in the morning.'

Joseph's eyes goggled. With one enormous, toil-roughened paw he clawed up the notes and coin.

'For me, m'sieu? Merci, m'sieu! M'sieu is too good.'

The young man laughed. 'Good-night, Joseph!'

'Good-night, M'sieu Royce, good-night, and thank you!'

Noiseless on his felt slippers he padded away.

Oliver Royce laughed and addressed the solitary palm, its ragged plumes dark against the greying sky.

'We'll make a whole job of it, anyway,' he remarked.

Then he switched off the light and got into bed.

CHAPTER VIII

IN WHICH A GREEN DIVING-CAP EMERGES FROM THE OCEAN

Oliver Royce ran down the beach, shed dressing-gown and slippers on the edge of the idly lapping waves, and plunged into the sea. It was a mother-of-pearl morning. The whole world seemed to gleam pinkly in the iridescent light. Behind him the Sunday bells rang to early church: before him, vast and blue and empty, the Mediterranean shimmered, still as an inland sea. The February ocean struck chill, but he welcomed its wintry nip. Exile had not robbed him of the Anglo-Saxon's faith in violent exercise as a remedy for mental ills. The brilliant morning, arousing him after a scant five hours in bed to a gnawing sensation of worry, had suggested to him a swim as the most efficacious means of sweeping the cobwebs from his brain. The beach on the far side of the harbour was a favourite haunt of his during his sojourns at Cannes, and, stopping only to shave, he had unearthed a swimming-suit from his suitcase, and in dressing-gown and slippers made his way through the Sabbath morning stillness of the streets to the *plage.*

Lashing the glittering wavelets with the strong sweep of his curved left arm and the rhythmic beat of his feet in a vigorous crawl-stroke, he headed for the diving-raft moored some fifty yards from the shore. Out of the water the sun smote pleasantly warm upon the skin. His back to the land, he rocked on the bobbing float, idly scanning the long green mass of the Îles des Lérins.

He shifted his gaze towards the harbour, where the slender masts of a score of pleasure yachts stabbed the azure sky. Some of them he knew. He recognized the Dolphin, a wonderful old three-decker breathing romance in her every spar, the solid magnificence of Solly Joel's Eileen, the exquisite line of the Alba, the yacht of Harvey Nolan, the American millionaire. He sighed. What a lot of money those yachts represented! What a bore money was, anyway! The wrong people always seemed to get it.

A splashing sound close at hand cut the thread of his musings. He glanced over his shoulder and saw a figure in a green diving-cap struggling laboriously towards the raft. As he looked, the swimmer, with chin sinking beneath the wavelets, emitted a sort of despairing squawk, staring upwards at the young man with plucky but rather anxious eyes. Flinging himself on his stomach, Royce stretched forth his arm and the swimmer, clutching the firm hand, was safely drawn to the ladder. Only then did the man on the raft perceive that the swimmer was a girl and, in the same instant, that it was the girl from Victor's.

'Well,' he exclaimed as he helped her up the steps, 'here's a coincidence if there ever was one. I was just thinking about you.'

She dropped panting upon the float, very trim in a one-piece bathing-suit of grass-green. 'That didn't... help much,' she gasped. 'I'd been calling at you for ages. But you wouldn't take any notice.'

'I'm most terribly sorry.' He glanced from the raft to the beach. 'That's quite a swim if you're not very expert. What would you have done if I hadn't been here?'

'I shouldn't have tried it,' she replied, unfastening the strap of her cap. 'I was undressing in one of the cabins and saw you go down the beach. I wanted to make sure of catching you...'

He scarcely heeded her words. He was thinking how exquisitely fine and white her skin was. The sea-water beading on it was like... like pearls laid on cream satin. How slim she was, how gracefully made! The close-fitting cap made her look like a young boy.

But now she was conscious of his scrutiny. She coloured up a little and whipped off her cap. With what appealed to him as a gesture of exquisite grace, she bent back her head and bared her aureole of red-gold locks to the breeze.

Her embarrassment gained him. 'The water's pretty cold,' he remarked, because he felt he ought to say something. 'I bet there aren't many girls who go in at this time of year.'

'I like swimming,' she replied simply. 'I think it keeps you fit. I wish I were better at it, though. I'm learning the trudgeon, but I don't get enough practice. I have time only on Sundays. Most Sundays I come here. On holidays, too. I bathed on Christmas morning. The water wasn't very cold, really. They gave us all a medal.' She gurgled a little laugh. 'It made me feel quite heroic. By the way,' she added, 'I brought that money for you. I meant to leave it at your hotel.'

He had forgotten all about her promise to repay him: in his experience, women were not particular in matters of this kind. 'I told you I didn't want it,' he replied.

'I'm a very independent person,' she told him laughingly. 'I don't like being under an obligation to anybody.'

His air was mortified. 'I see. I suppose you're angry with me... about last night.'

She flushed a little. 'Not in the least.' Her voice was cool. 'You didn't know me, did you? How could you tell I didn't expect something of the sort?'

With his finger he was tracing patterns on the rough planking. 'I didn't mean to offend you. But I was carried away. I'd... I'd been feeling pretty miserable and I'd... well, I'd had a drink or two as well.' He looked up at her rather hungrily. 'Won't you... won't you forgive me?'

She dabbled a nonchalant foot in the water. Holding her small head high, she answered without meeting his eye: 'There's nothing to forgive. A girl who lets a man pick her up — that's what you call it, isn't it? — has nothing better to look for. After all, you paid for my dinner and I suppose you had a right to think yourself entitled...'

'That's a beastly thing to say,' he broke in hotly. 'You know I thought nothing of the sort...'

The feeling in his voice made her pause. She raised her eyes to his. The sight of his face, flushed and indignant, seemed to soften her. 'Then why do you make me say such things?' she demanded. 'And why have you spoilt everything?'

'I don't want to defend myself, I can't defend myself,' he returned soberly. 'I know I've spoilt things and I never meant to. When a fellow has knocked about the Continent as I have for the last five years, I expect he gets a bit cynical about women. You need never speak to me again if you don't want to. But at least let me hear you say you believe I'm sorry for... for hurting you.'

'Why should you care what I think?' she questioned in a low voice.

He did not reply at once, staring away from her over the glassy surface of the ocean. 'I don't know why,' he said at last, 'but I do. Though I met you only yesterday, I feel as if we were old friends. Honestly, when I saw you at the Grelot last night, there was something about you that drew me to you at once. I'm not going to be a hypocrite and pretend that when I spoke to you I didn't think it would be fun to have a romantic episode with such a beautiful person as you are. But over and above this, there was something else. I was conscious of something fine and... and brave and... and honest about you that made me want us to be pals. Like men are pals, if you like, but pals. Do you see? More than anything I've ever wanted in my life, I wanted you to like me. After I left you last night, just out of sheer funk that you'd never speak to me again, I felt like a man who has dropped and smashed some priceless piece of porcelain. And I keep on thinking of you. Jacqueline, couldn't you like me a little?'

She made a little movement of one rounded shoulder and idly dipped her hand into the water. Then she swung about and faced him. Proud and slender, she contemplated him gravely. 'Tell me something,' she said. 'At the Grelot last night you thought I was glad to see you?'

'Perhaps. Ye-es.'

'I was. You see, we really have met before. But you've forgotten me.'

With a puzzled air he scanned her face. 'That's not possible. I could never forget any one like you. You must be mixing me up with somebody else.'

She smiled wistfully and, with a sidelong glance, shook her head.

'Don't you remember Chez Morrisot's?' she asked softly.

CHAPTER IX

CHEZ MORRISOT'S

Chez Morrisot's...

At her words the sunlit seascape seemed to dissolve and he found himself in Paris on a night of fog. At the very hub of Paris, in one of the narrow, swarming streets that environ the Saint-Lazare Station, with the clamour of the traffic mounting to heaven in a constant, raucous roar. He saw again the little bar, opposite the gaunt and sooty station wall, with a jostling throng, the excitable Paris crowd, striving to peer through the closed and guarded glass doors, whence the light streamed brightly into the swirling mist, and being slowly driven forward by a couple of hooded policemen. The very cries of the agents, 'Allons, circulez! Avançons, nom d'un chien!' seemed to ring in his ears, as he had heard them when, his police pass in his hand, he had fought his way through the press to the doors of Chez Morrisot's.

It was during his time on 'The Day.' On this winter evening after dinner he was alone, in charge of the office. The telephonist, who, between his calls to London, had slipped out for a bite, returned hastily to say that Morrisot, the famous English clown, had been murdered at the bar he kept in the rue Saint-Lazare.

Oliver Royce had never heard of Morrisot. But the telephonist, an Anglo-Parisian, born and bred, son of an English harness-maker of the rue du Colisée, knew all about him. Morrisot, it seems, had been quite a celebrity in his day. Then all Paris had flocked to the Cirque

Médrano to laugh at and with this grotesque buffoon, the Lancashire clown, who, drifting to France with a travelling show, had clambered to the pinnacle of Parisian fame.

An accident in the ring had led to his retirement. Thereupon he had opened a small bar under the shadow of the great Saint-Lazare terminus. Chez Morrisot's was mainly frequented by the humbler members of the racing confraternity in France, jockeys and lads from the stables round Paris, and also by bookies of the seedier sort and touts from London, who would drop in of a Sunday morning for a glass of bitter on their way to the races.

And now Morrisot had been murdered. Alfred, the telephonist, passing down the rue Saint-Lazare, had been on the spot a few minutes after it had happened. It appeared that a man had burst into the bar and threatened Madame Célie, the manageress, with a revolver. When Morrisot had gone to put him out, the stranger had shot the clown and thereafter opened fire on the woman, killing her instantly. The murderer had escaped. Alfred had seen the bodies before, with the arrival of the commissary of police, the bar had been cleared of the gaping mob, and had taken a cab back to the office hotfoot with the news....

With incredulous eyes Oliver Royce stared at the girl from Victor's.

'So you're little Jack?' he said.

How clearly it all came back to him! He saw the narrow barroom, very garish under its glaring electric lights reflected from the tiled walls, with its bright cane chairs, and on one side the cashier's desk, flanking the tall counter with its coffee-machine, its beer-engines, its frieze of bottles.

It was his first big story. He remembered how thrilled he was to find himself the first newspaper man to arrive on the scene, and the feeling of awe with which he contemplated the limp figure of a stout woman with dyed flaxen hair and a white silk blouse which rested collapsed on a bench in the corner. No blood, just an expression of utter weariness on the wan and waxen features.

Police photographers on ladders, cigarette in mouth, were nonchalantly busy about the body. The place reeked of their magnesium powder, and there was the odour of warm paraffin from the police cyclist's machine propped up against the counter. Funny, how smells lingered in the memory! Outside, in the fog, the baying crowd surged against the doors. The clown's body had been taken to a back room, the policeman said. He was breathing, but was not expected to live. The doctor was with him.

Then a very young girl came in, a lanky little figure in black. As she entered from a door beside the bar, there was a blinding flash, a thud against the door, and a great cauliflower of white smoke mounted to the centre cluster of lights. The girl shrank away and caught sight of the stranger talking to the policeman.

'Morrisot's daughter,' the policeman whispered. 'She saw it happen.'

The girl came slowly forward ....

The wash of a passing speed-boat rocked the raft. It oscillated violently. Royce put out his arm to steady his companion and it slid about her bare shoulders. She reseated herself, stretching her shapely legs on the planking in front of her. She smiled up at him.

'Do you find me so altered?'

'It's incredible!' he exclaimed. 'Of all the transformations! I should never have known you again! God bless my soul, what a quaint little creature you were!'

'I've grown up,' she remarked demurely, leaning back on her hands. 'Six years is a long time.'

'Is it really six years? Time passes so fast.'

'Almost to a day. It was in February, you know.'

He nodded. 'Well,' he observed, 'I can't get over the change in you. Why, you were all eyes — such big, staring eyes — like a young bird! And your English was a scream, half French and half Lancashire. Do you remember?'

She laughed, but her eyes were wistful. 'Aye,' she said in the speech of Wigan, 'I learned my English along of old ma-an!'

He laughed outright. The flat Lancashire drawl was perfectly imitated.

'But,' he persisted, 'you've blossomed out in such an amazing way. You mustn't mind my saying this, but that time I first met you, you were an awkward, skinny little thing, and, oh, so woefully shabby and neglected.'

Her face clouded over. 'I didn't have much of a chance. The bar was the only home I ever knew. You see, I was a baby when my mother set up house with Morrisot...'

'Madame Célie, that was what they used to call your mother, wasn't it? You see, I remember even the name...'

'That's right...'

He threw back his head suddenly and laughed. 'Gosh, what a rum little beggar you were! I remember, when I was getting my story from you, and I said something about "Madame Morrisot," you corrected me. "Dad an' 'er worn't married," you said. "They joost lived together, see?"' He chuckled. 'At least, it sounded something like that.'

She nodded seriously. 'I always called him "Dad," although he wasn't my father...'

'I remember now,' he put in hastily. 'Didn't you have some letters about this unknown father of yours?'

'Only one letter,' she amended. 'Have you forgotten taking me to the lawyer? You were so kind...'

'Jove, yes, of course! The lawyer had found some letter in your mother's papers: — from an American, wasn't it? — suggesting that the writer might have been your father...'

She nodded. 'There was no doubt about it, I think. Don't you remember there was also my mother's reply to that letter, or rather a copy of it, written several years later, in which she speaks of me as "little Jack"?' She broke off. 'But that's an old story now.'

'The lawyer was going to make some enquiries, wasn't he?' Royce asked. 'Did he ever find out anything?'

'Not a great deal.'

Seated with their backs to the land, he had a pleasant feeling of remoteness, a sense of intimacy with the dainty, vital creature at his side.

He tucked his arm in hers and she settled down, resting her weight against him, to tell her tale. 'My mother was originally in the ballet at the Cirque Médrano. Her name was Célie Richard...'

'I remember,' said Royce, looking down on the white and shapely neck.

'She had a love affair with this American...'

'Wait,' said the boy, snapping his fingers. 'What was the name again? A nickname, wasn't it?'

'Vin,' she answered. 'They told me it's short for Vincent. He must have been quite young. His letter is in a schoolboy hand, with mistakes in the spelling. I think he meant to marry her: at any rate, the letters make it clear that the family bought her off. Then I was born, and, a year later, she married a man named Henri Laurent...'

'That was the name I was trying to think of,' Royce interrupted. 'He was the man who killed her and Morrisot, wasn't he?'

She gave a little shiver. 'I was fifteen at the time, and I remember that terrible evening as clearly as though it were yesterday. We'd just finished dinner: — we always dined together in a corner of the bar, just the four of us, Dad and Célie — I always called her Célie, the same as he did — Paul, the waiter, and I. The only other person in the place was an old horse-cabman who'd been coming to the bar as long as I could remember. Well, on this evening, dinner was over and Célie had sent Paul down to the cellar to fetch up a case of Évian. Dad was behind the bar. Old Rince l'Œil — that was the cabby — was telling us a story about a time, once, when he drove King Edward in Paris, and was keeping us in fits. Suddenly Célie, who had been laughing very much, became perfectly quiet. I turned round to look at her. Her face was ghastly. She was staring past me at the door with her mouth open and her eyes — well, sort of glassy with horror.

'I faced round. A strange man had come into the bar. He wore a black felt hat and an overcoat with the collar turned up. My first thought was that he looked dreadfully ill. His face was yellow and so thin that the cheekbones stood out white under the skin. He had a small dark moustache and a cruel mouth — you know, snarling, like a rat's. He paid no attention to any of us, but walked straight over to the corner where Célie was sitting. As he did so, she stood up, pushing blindly at the table to free herself, and whispered, "Henri...!"'

The girl at Royce's side broke off, staring fixedly before her. Royce, fascinated by the play of the emotions on her plastic features, did not interrupt her.

'Children are often intuitive,' she resumed. 'I must have had a presentiment of tragedy, for I remember scrambling from my chair and huddling against the wall out of the man's way. Célie terrified me, too. Ordinarily she was so brisk and efficient — she never changed. I'm quite sure no one at Morrisot's had ever seen her frightened before.

'The man said: "Madame is snug here. Madame refuses herself nothing. But in fourteen years one can get a comfortable home together..."

'Célie murmured something and the man spoke back. He never raised his voice: — it was low and threatening; he seemed to hiss his words. I have never forgotten them. "Hate makes a man immortal," he said. "I told you I would come back..."

'Then his arm moved quickly and I saw something black in his hand. I noticed that he was shaking from head to foot: his face was livid. He was like some one who has suddenly lost his senses. He screamed something about "Judas" and "traitress" and to-night being his turn. And then Dad stepped between them...'

Royce's mouth was grim. 'I remember. Morrisot went for him unarmed. The real Lancashire spirit. I played that up in my story. "The Day" had an editorial note about it.'

'There was a tremendous crash, and I saw Dad on his knees coughing, coughing. After that, it's all a blur. I remember the bar being full of people and a policeman coming and Célie being very still in her corner — I thought she'd fainted. Afterwards they told me she was dead. There had been a second shot, but I didn't hear it. Then you came and were so sweet to me…'

A humorous expression came into his face. 'Policy. I had to get the story.'

'You did everything a man could do for a child in my position,' she amended. 'Don't you remember taking me round to the nuns where I had been at school to sleep? And the next day you escorted me to the lawyer's, after we'd had lunch together. Such a wonderful lunch. At a restaurant on the boulevards. I was thrilled to the bone. The first time I'd ever been taken out by a young man…'

He nodded reminiscently. 'The murderer was never caught, I think?'

'The police believe he committed suicide: at least, some weeks later a body was taken out of the Seine which they thought might be his. But it was never properly identified. He was a convict, you know. He'd escaped from the *bagne* — what do you call that in English?'

'The French penal settlements. French Guiana, wasn't it?'

'Yes. When he was married to Célie, he ran some kind of blackmailing newspaper in Paris. One of his victims stood up to him and this man Laurent shot him. He fled to Corsica. It was Célie who denounced him to the police.'

'The police hinted as much to me at the time — let's see, what was the name of the fellow in charge of the case?'

'Inspector Dufour. But he never knew the real truth.'

'Ah?' The journalist in Royce pricked up his ears.

'Perhaps you don't remember that letter of Célie's the lawyer found among her papers, the one to the young American who we think was my father?'

'Only vaguely...'

'In that letter Célie told him he was not to pay any attention to demands he might receive for money for herself or the child — that was me. It looks to me as though this horrible creature, Laurent, had threatened to blackmail my father, and, to stop it, Célie gave him away to the police.'

'Did these friends of hers know anything about this mysterious American?'

She shook her head. 'They knew she had a rich young man who wanted to marry her, nothing more. Morrisot had always been in love with Célie and, when I was expected, he wanted her to marry him. But she refused, although she allowed him to be registered as my father, to give me a name. Then, after all, she goes and marries a scoundrel like this Laurent. Aren't women the devil?'

He laughed at her earnestness. 'I've always heard so.'

'Dad just waited. Then he broke his leg and had to leave the ring for good. By this time Laurent had been convicted and sentenced to transportation for life. I suppose Célie relented, and, as she couldn't marry Dad, her husband being alive, she went to live with him. Although she was my mother, he always took more interest in me than she ever did. When I left school, Célie wanted me to work in the bar. But Dad wouldn't have it. He insisted on my learning a trade. And so I went to Delly's — you know, the dress-shop where I was working when I met you.'

He nodded. 'I know. You were the "petite main." Well, you've got on, haven't you?'

She made a little grimace. 'I don't know. I don't want to sell frocks all my life. But I'm not ungrateful. I've been fortunate. I had one great stroke of luck. Victor saw me by accident and thought I could wear his clothes.'

Away to the left a white yacht came gliding out between the harbour moles under her own power. The faint beat of her propeller throbbed upon the still air.

'To look at,' pronounced the girl, 'you haven't changed at all. To me you seem as young and presentable and successful as you were all those years ago in Paris. In my young eyes the chief correspondent of "The Day" was a tremendously important person, as I suppose you were. Are you still on "The Day"?'

'No, I left them when the paper was sold.'

'But you still write for the newspapers?'

He hesitated for the fraction of a second. 'Er... yes.'

'And you're still successful?'

'I don't do too badly,' he said in a stony voice.

'I was right, then. Outwardly, you haven't changed at all...'

'Meaning that inwardly I have?'

She was silent.

'I suppose I made you angry last night?' he asked gently.

She shrugged her shoulders. 'Not angry...'

'I disappointed you then...?'

She bowed her head without speaking. 'It was just a memory I treasured,' she said after a pause, 'and it was rather precious. But it's all right now.'

A loud hail from the shore resounded. 'Hé, Jack!' rang out in a chorus of voices across the water. Simultaneously the couple on the raft turned about. Two girls in light frocks, accompanied by a youth in a béret and pull-over, stood on the beach and waved.

'Heavens,' Jacqueline exclaimed, 'I must fly! One of the girls from Victor's has produced an admirer with a racing Bugatti, and she and another girl and I are going over to Saint Raphael for lunch.' She fluttered her hand shoreward. 'Gaby, je viens!' she called.

Now they were on their feet, uncertainly poised on the dancing float.

'Can you manage the swim, do you think?' Royce asked.

'It doesn't look so far facing this way,' she told him. 'Besides, if you'll swim with me, you'll give me confidence.'

He was still holding the envelope with the money. 'I can't swim with this,' he said. 'You'd better put it back in your cap.'

Their hands and eyes met. Her glance was forgiving. She laughed her crooning laugh and stowed the money away in the cap which she pulled on over her ears. She let him fasten the strap.

'If I can't swim, at least I can dive!' she cried, and led off with a neat header. He followed after and they swam to the shore.

On the beach she introduced him to her friends — Mademoiselle Dolores, an olive-skinned brunette with magnificent eyes, and Mademoiselle Gaby, in whom he recognized the roguish-looking little mannequin of the dress show. The Bugatti owner, a callow and somewhat pimply French youth, was ignored. But Mademoiselle Gaby showed who was the originator of the party by the proprietorial air with which she ordered him to fetch two more Dubonnets in supplement to the three standing on a tray on the verandah of the bathing-station. Meanwhile, Jacqueline went off to dress.

Over their Dubonnets, Mademoiselle Dolores holding herself somewhat sulkily aloof, Mademoiselle Gaby chattered genteelly of the delight of aquatic sports in which, to her lasting regret, a disposition towards rheumatism — she was perhaps twenty — forbade her to indulge. Then, after a surprisingly brief delay, Jacqueline appeared in a ravishing little *tailleur* with a vivid scarf knotted loosely about her shoulders. She tossed off her Dubonnet, and within a minute Royce was waving to a cloud of dust that rapidly vanished along the boulevard outside. Only then did he realize that he had not asked when he might see her again.

Well, there was always the Casino — if so be it he could free himself from Mousie's vigilant chaperonage. Dejectedly, he hitched his wrap about him and set off for his hotel to dress for lunch at the Villa Célandine.

CHAPTER X

AT THE VILLA CÉLANDINE

THERE was no sign of Mousie Hersent's usual Sunday morning crowd when Oliver Royce reached the villa. The verandah, which ran the length of the south side of the house, was deserted, but a platoon of bottles and a tray of cocktail glasses set out on a table betrayed the fact that guests were expected. The front door was open, but while the car took his suitcase round to the back, the young man paused and surveyed the surroundings of his future home.

In the blinding sunshine of this perfect Riviera day he found his prospects much less depressing. Here, on the high ground, the air was clean and sweet and saturated with the fragrance of the garden, which, intersected by moss-grown paths, dropped to the public roadway below. Bees hummed among the flowering bushes which edged the drive. In a fir a bird whistled a merry little catch over and over again. The garden blazed with mimosas bowed down under the weight of their golden blossoms. On the horizon the ocean glittered like a scene painted on blue glass. The shadow cast by the house was hard and black.

This was better than his Monte Carlo pub, better than the Val d'Or, the young man reflected. After all, he had a job. It might be rather fun running a house and chasing these thieving Provençal servants. Mousie Hersent wasn't so bad, if you took her the right way. She was vulgar, of course, and she looked frightful. But she was a good sort: he could manage her. Thus encouraging himself, he entered his new abode.

As the butler did not appear, he walked in. Dominique, he surmised, was busy with the luncheon. He knew the geography of the villa, anyway. The morning-room door, on the left of the hall, stood open. The room was empty and so was the drawing-room beyond. At the end of the hall on the right a small anteroom, loaded with china knick-knacks, which Mousie called her boudoir, opened into a large apartment that had been a billiard-room. As Royce went into the boudoir, he heard his hostess's voice coming from this room.

He had no intention of listening, but, as Mrs. Cluppins remarked on a classic occasion, the voice 'forced itself' upon his ear. Now the unusual note in the voice he heard coming from the library arrested his attention at once.

He knew it for Mousie's voice: her accent was unmistakable. It rang out raucous and shrill and, as it seemed to him, quickened with fear. 'It's the last time,' were the words he heard. 'It's more than flesh and blood will stand. After this, you can do your damnedest for all I care...'

A deep voice, a man's voice, too soft to be audible, broke in. Oliver, unwilling to be found eavesdropping, had turned to go when the library door suddenly opened and Mrs. Hersent herself appeared. Her eyes smouldered, and her doughy face was leaden in hue, the features discomposed. At the sight of Oliver, however, she brightened.

'I'm so glad you're here,' she said forlornly. She laid a pudgy hand to her brow. 'My head's just splitting. I've had such a worrying morning. Run out and shake up a cocktail, will you, like a dear boy? I'll be out in a minute...'

But before Oliver could obey her, a short bearded man with a large stomach appeared behind her in the doorway.

'A friend of yours, my dear?' he enquired in English, with a marked foreign accent.

Mrs. Hersent turned her back on him. 'Run along now, Olly, and mix me a cocktail!' she told Oliver.

'But a friend of yours, my dear Ada,' said the fat man, stepping forward, 'is also a friend of mine. Pray present me.'

Mousie assumed a sulky expression. But she made the introduction. 'Mr. Ribeira, a friend of mine: Mr. Royce.'

'An old friend,' the fat man corrected. He bowed effusively to Oliver. 'From the Argentine. It is four years already since I have seen her, and I find her, imagine it, so young, so beautiful' — his voice rose to an ecstatic exclamation and he kissed the tips of his fingers — 'as the day she go away from me.'

The Argentine gave Oliver his hand, beaming through his glasses. His horn spectacles, combined with his large beard, gave him a learned look, as of a scientist or professor. 'I am enchanted,' he observed. 'You are at Cannes, yes?'

'Mr. Royce is going to be my secretary,' the lady explained, rather condescendingly. 'He's coming to live here. Aren't you, Olly boy?' She gave him an arch smile.

Dramatically the fat man clapped his hand to his head, the top of which was completely bald. 'Dios!' he ejaculated in a hollow voice, 'what luck youth has! You are to live in the same house, beneath the identical roof, with this adorable *doña*. Be on your guard, young man, or she will captivate you as she has captivated me!'

Mrs. Hersent sniffed. Nevertheless, her expression was not severe. 'Don't you imagine you'll get round me like that, Ribby,' she exclaimed. 'I'm very cross with you. You know I've every right to be.'

The Argentine heaved a tragic sigh. 'You condemn me to death. Do you command me to leave your house?'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'I suppose you'd better stay to lunch.'

He lifted her arm and tucked it in his. 'I knew that my sweet Ada could not for long be angry with her old Ribby,' he observed confidentially.

'You may call me Mousie, if you like, as the others do,' she told him.

'Mouzee,' he repeated. 'This funny name!' He threw back his head and laughed until his great brown beard, spread out above his ample and protuberant paunch, shook. 'All right, I shall be the cat and eat you up.' And he clawed her back with his fingers.

Mrs. Hersent burst into a shriek of girlish laughter. 'Ribby, will you behave? Ribby, a-oh, you're tickling me...'

The fat man bounced up and down, his fingers clenched like claws, miaowing ferociously. His fooling made Oliver laugh — it was irresistibly comic. For one of his girth he was surprisingly agile.

The sound of a car outside broke in upon this diversion. 'Ribby, will you stop?' the giggling Mousie commanded. 'People are arriving for lunch.'

Panting and blowing, but wreathed in the most disarming of smiles, the Argentine desisted.

'You're as crazy as ever,' Mrs. Hersent remarked, glancing at herself in the mirror of her vanity-case, 'carrying on like a kid, the way you do. I declare you don't learn sense as you grow older.'

His hands folded placidly across his large stomach, he beamed affably. 'Then you, my dear Mouzee, shall teach me how always to be young!'

She uttered a little simpering ejaculation. 'Go along with you!' she said. She gave Oliver a soulful look. 'Olly never pays me pretty compliments like that, do you, Olly?' She took the young man's arm. 'Come along, we'll go and have a cocktail. Mousie will make one the way that Olly likes it.' And she squeezed his arm.

He looked at her wonderingly. This was the old Mousie, simpering, fatuous, and oozing self-satisfaction. It was difficult to identify her with the scared and angry woman whose voice he had heard coming from the library.

CHAPTER XI

RIBEIRA

ALL the afternoon the villa swarmed with visitors. They arrived in relays, relieving one another, and at one time as many as six or seven cars were parked on the gravel before the house and along the drive. None of Mousie Hersent's guests was very young in years. All, without exception, were on the mature side, though hard exercise in the sun and wind had given some of the men a well-set-up, athletic appearance, and, in the case of most of the women, beauty treatments and expensive frocks went far to produce the illusion of youth. Everybody was smartly dressed; everybody was self-centred and cynical, and invested with a sort of hard-faced, loud-voiced quality which put Oliver Royce in mind of his shabby friend, Major Wetherton.

There was bridge in the morning-room, dancing, to an enormous victrola, in the library, tea on the verandah, and cocktails everywhere. Dominique, the swarthy and somewhat surly maître d'hôtel, was constantly to and fro with trays of glasses. Rather helplessly the well-intentioned Fitchie fussed over all. Very scant attention — or so it seemed to Oliver — was paid to the hostess. New arrivals drifted in, took a cocktail or a cup of tea, or went in to dance without troubling about her, unless their steps led them to the morning-room, where, engrossed in an endless series of rubbers with Ribeira and two of the luncheon guests, Mrs. Hersent would wave a plump hand and in turn be rapturously greeted as 'darling Mousie.'

Soon after six o'clock, the cocktail hour at the Casino, the party began to thin out. Oliver was by himself in the library, looking over some new books which had lately come — 'The Times' Book Club sent out a parcel every week — when a bearded face appeared round the door. It was Ribeira, the merry Argentine. Seeing that the young man was alone, Ribeira entered and, crossing to the tantalus which stood on a side-table, mixed himself a whisky-and-soda which he drained at a draught. 'Ouf!' he grunted, and setting down the glass, he stretched himself expansively.

'Bridge all over?' asked Oliver, glancing up from his book.

The other nodded and, doffing his specs, started to rub them up with his handkerchief. 'Like so many charming women,' he remarked, breathing hard on the lenses, 'our delightful Ada — I should say, Mouzee — has... very little... idea... of bridge.' His polishing finished, he popped his goggles on his nose and surveyed the young man. 'You know her well, yes?' he questioned brightly.

'As a matter of fact,' said Oliver, without raising his eyes from his page — he vaguely resented the other's inquisitiveness — 'I met Mrs. Hersent only a month ago.'

The Argentine nodded briskly. 'A golden woman,' he pronounced, smiling expansively. 'To know her is to fall a victim to her charms. Four years have passed since we last met and never have I forgotten her. No, señor. It was Buenos Ayres — you know she has visited my country?'

Who of Mrs. Hersent's acquaintances did not? Oliver felt inclined to ask him. Mousie's South American cruise was still a recurrent theme of her conversation. At lunch, that very day, she had promised to let Oliver see her snapshots.

Yes, the young man said, she had told him of her visit.

'It was my privilege,' Ribeira pursued genially, 'to show her the beauties of our great capital. She and I were constantly in one another's company. Ha, what magic days! I will be frank with you. I was in love!' He gurgled and blinked his small and intelligent eyes very rapidly.

He certainly was a cheerful old party was Oliver's reflection. His gaiety was infectious, and the young man found himself smiling. In spite of himself. For the words he had overheard before luncheon, there in that very room, had just come into his mind. Was this affair really serious? Ribeira and Mousie had been quarrelling. Of that there was not a shadow of doubt. A lovers' quarrel? Her voice had sounded scared as well as angry. To judge by what she said, Ribeira seemed to have been threatening her. He considered the Argentine with interest.

'Because I am her friend,' the fat man was saying, 'I do not like to see her good-nature abused. This is the first time I come to the Villa Célandine. What do I find? Her house, but it is an hotel, a veritable *posada*!' He adjusted his spectacles and mustered his companion. 'As our dear friend's secretary, young man, a great responsibility is yours. You must protect her against this... this' — his hand groped as though he would snatch the word he wanted from the surrounding air — 'this rabble that prey upon her.'

Pursing up his bearded lips, the Argentine discharged a fine spiral of smoke and thoughtfully examined the tip of his cigar. 'Our little Mouzee is rich, no? A woman is so easily taken in. These cigars, par exemple. And the Côte d'Azur swarms with adventurers. I, who speak my mind to her, am repelled. You, as her secretary, have the better chance to protect her. If at any time you think she make a fool of herself, that some man abuse her good-nature, you come to old Ribeira, hein, hein? at the Grand Hotel, and we shall — how do you say? — knock our heads together...'

Oliver laughed out loud. 'Lay our heads together, you mean.'

His companion was not in the least offended by this outburst of mirth. He chuckled amiably. 'Always I like to speak your language. I make my English friends to laugh with my mistakes. It is well to laugh. Laughter is good for the soul. But you understand me, Señor Oliver. If at any time you want me...'

'Hey, you there, what's-your-name!'

A raucous voice hailed them from the threshold. A tall and bony female in mannish clothes, a cigarette-holder about a foot long between her teeth, stood in the doorway. In a brisk and bustling fashion she was beating a pair of leather gauntlets against her hip. 'Mousie said I was to run you home in my 'bus,' she announced in a sort of fruity tenor. 'If you're comin', you'd better wake yourself up.'

Spake and strode away.

The Argentine cast a haggard glance at his companion. At that precise moment he looked singularly unmerry. 'I play bridge with her this afternoon,' he said in an awed voice. 'She terrify me. Always I am frightened I shall offend her if I am polite to her like with a woman. Don't leave me to drive with her alone, my friend. Come with me a little to the Casino, I beg. We shall make together a tour of the rooms before dinner.'

'I'd love to,' Oliver responded promptly.

He had been speculating whether he would be able to get down to the Casino before dinner — Mousie showed no signs of going out. If the party were back from Saint Raphael, which they surely would be, as dark had fallen two hours since, Jacqueline was certain to be in the rooms. At the cocktail hour on Sunday evenings, all Cannes was habitually found there.

For all the stir of the Villa Célandine he was conscious of an immense sense of loneliness: this child he had befriended, stretching forth her little hands out of a happier, a worthier past, appeared to him as his only anchor. With the vanity of a very young man he had lied to her in those distant days in Paris, representing himself, the humble understudy, as the head of 'The Day' office — he had forgotten all about this detail — and to-day he had deceived her again about his true situation. No matter. He was aware of the most desperate longing to see her and speak with her again.

As he and Ribeira crossed the hall, Mousie came out of the morning-room. She did not look her best. She had been drinking cocktails, and alcohol always played havoc with her facial appearance. Her features seemed coarser than ever and there were bags under her eyes. Oliver thought of Jacqueline and her charming face, and the impulse was strong on him to flee.

With effusive courtesy the Argentine bent over the hostess's hand. 'I take our young friend to the Casino for half an hour, yes?' he observed, indicating Oliver, who was gathering up his overcoat and hat.

Mousie's eyes narrowed. 'Oh,' she said, 'I'm *quite* sure that Olly doesn't want to go out the very first evening he's here. Do you, Olly boy?'

Mousie Hersent's thick lips brushed the young man's ear. 'Mousie wants Olly to stay,' she whispered hoarsely.

'I thought we'd have a little business talk before dinner.' To Ribeira she said: 'Not this evening, Ribby. Some other time.'

Then the front door was violently burst open, admitting a current of glacial air. Mrs. Hersent retreated hastily into the morning-room. A furious, gruff voice cried out of the night: 'Where the hell's that chap, Ribeira, sticking?'

The Argentine rolled up his eyes with mock horror and gave Oliver his hand. 'Au revoir, then, and think over what I have said.'

The front door slammed. The car was heard whirling off down the drive.

Oliver paused for a moment where he stood and looked about him. Through the open door of the bridge-room he could see the litter of cards, the brimming ash-trays, the glut of used glasses. Staleness lay over everything. The mess revolted him and more than that the spectacle, which his brief glance had also taken in, of Mousie Hersent, reclining on a couch, flushed and fretful, amid the débris of the feast, fondling Chéri, her elderly and malodorous Pekinese, with her patient slave, Fitchie, fanning the pair of them. But most crushing of all was his sense of abasement.

He had heard the crack of the whip. And he had obeyed.

CHAPTER XII

BEHIND THE COLUMNS

It was three days before he met Jacqueline again. On two successive evenings he accompanied Mousie to the gaming-rooms before dinner without as much as catching a glimpse of the girl. He had a curious sensation of missing her. The discovery of the part he had played in her romantic life-story gave him a feeling as though he should be protecting her and should know what she was doing with herself, how she was spending her time. More than this, she appeared to him to be the last remaining link with the independence which he knew he had forfeited in accepting Mousie Hersent's invitation.

And then, on the third evening, he saw her. Mousie Hersent was running a bank and he, rather bored, was looking on. Before ever he raised his eyes from the green cloth with its rampart of watching faces, some sixth sense told him that the girl was at hand. For the instant his sensation of gladness was so satisfying that he indulged it, forbearing to look up in the certitude that her glance was upon him. At last he raised his eyes and, with a sure instinct, turned his gaze to the top of the table. There she stood, smiling at him.

The next instant he was beside her, Mousie and all that she implied forgotten. 'Let's go and talk,' he said, and with no other greeting, took her arm and led her across the room to where, behind some pillars, chairs and tables were set out as an overflow from the adjacent bar. It was early and the *thé dansant* in the Restaurant des Ambassadeurs was not yet over, so they had the corner to themselves.

She spoke no word, but let him have his way. When they were seated, 'It's funny,' he said, 'but I knew it was you before I looked up.'

'I knew you were here the moment I came into the room,' she answered simply.

They were both a trifle embarrassed. He devoured her with his eyes. Her small hat, her little frock, were severely plain. Lawn frills at the neck and wrists lent her an amusing Quakerish air. It was the elegance of perfect simplicity — he recognized the true Parisian touch.

'You look very nice,' he said. 'That frock suits you. Victor certainly knows how to dress *you*...'

'This isn't one of Victor's,' she answered. 'I made this myself...'

She met his gaze and flushed a little. How young, how fresh, how candid she appeared, he reflected, in that artificial atmosphere! To look at her brought to one's mind something cool and fragrant and wild, something of the woods, like a primrose or a snowdrop nestling, dew-drenched, under a hedgerow.

The sheltering pillars hid them from the room. He laid his hand on her small one, imprisoning it. 'Oh, Jack,' he exclaimed, 'I've missed you so! Have you thought of me at all since Sunday?'

She nodded. She did not withdraw her hand.

'Often?'

She nodded again.

And then, as they sat at the table behind the columns, with the chant of the *croupiers* in their ears, his arm was suddenly about her, the charming face was raised to his, the lips just parted in a little smile. He bent down and kissed her on the mouth, felt her soft lips cling, the weight of her body limp on his arm.

She drew away. She was awed and a little breathless. 'I mustn't stop,' she said, and glanced at her watch. 'I'm going to a party Victor's giving at Juan, and we're supposed to leave at half-past seven.' She stood up, gathering her bag and umbrella.

'But, Jack,' he cried, 'before you go, tell me when I'm going to see you again!'

She was already moving away. 'Come and swim on Sunday morning,' she said. 'If you're free before, ring me up at the shop! Addio!'

She pressed her hand to her mouth as though to imprison there his kiss, then turned and was gone.

Oliver remained where she had left him, staring down at the table. What right had he, who had sold himself to Mousie Hersent, to offer this girl his love? A great wave of bitterness seemed to engulf him. So absorbed in thought was he that a flunkey in knee-breeches who had sought him out had to address him twice before the young man took notice.

'Madame is looking for monsieur,' the servant announced.

Slowly Oliver followed the flunkey back to the tables.

CHAPTER XIII

MADAME'S FROCK COMES HOME

As Oliver Royce stepped out from the verandah of the Villa Célandine, the great wind tore through his hair and flapped his jacket mischievously about him. For three days the mistral had raged and the air was filled with its clamour. The rugged silhouette of the Esterel, peak upon peak, was blurred with the dust blown up from the coast road, and all along the shore the dust and spray flung a haze over the deep hem of creaming foam marking the tide's edge. The wine-coloured Mediterranean was whipped into fury. From the terrace, through the golden mimosa showers of the garden below, one had a glimpse of the sea pouring in a white sheet over the curving mole of Cannes Harbour and of the scarlet light marking the mouth standing up to its armpits in the boiling ocean.

The fortnight he had spent at the Villa Célandine had shown him his secretarial duties were the merest farce. Mousie had never given him a letter to write, and Fitchie continued to handle the correspondence and the books. All he had to do was to fetch and carry about the house and take Mousie dancing at the Casino or accompany her to parties. Yet he was not his own master. Did he as much as go down to the main road for a stroll before breakfast, on his return there would be Mousie in a wrapper on her balcony, prepared to cross-examine him as to where he had been and declaring she had been looking for him to perform various odd jobs — which, he was sure, she made up on the spur of the moment — all in a plaintive tone, with sundry indirect but none the less plain allusions to the fact that he was under an obligation to her.

And the whole atmosphere of the villa repelled him. The rule of life there was simple enough. Mousie had to be flattered: there was no limit, he thought, to the amount of soft soap she could imbibe. The entire household was united in a conspiracy of outrageous sycophancy. Fitchie, wretchedly incompetent in every way, but loving a good time, held her job by means of abject adulation; Marie, who, as Fitchie declared, helped herself freely to Madame's expensive stockings and underwear, secured immunity by a similar system of preposterous compliments; while, quite obviously, Mousie's reluctance to put her foot down about the bills was inspired by the positively grotesque fashion in which Célestine, and even the overbearing Dominique, fawned upon her. Oliver might have followed suit — in his present mood he did not care much what he did — only he was beginning to discover that the slightest gallantry kindled in that dull eye an unexpected gleam which filled him with nausea.

His heart felt as empty as the garden, and as cold under the mistral's lash. He had never seen Jacqueline to speak to since that night. He had gone to the beach on the appointed Sunday (much to Mousie's displeasure, although she made out that she was actuated solely by concern for his health), but the green bathing-cap did not appear, and the gambling-rooms knew her no more.

He told himself that she must be ill or away, that she would write — she did not know that he was at the villa, but his hotel was sending letters on. No letter, however, came. He snatched a moment when the coast seemed clear at the villa to telephone her at Victor's. But she was not in, and when he was about to ask whether she was away, he heard the tap of Mousie's high-heels in the hall and had to ring off. He wrote several letters to her, but tore them up again, vaguely resentful of her failure to keep their appointment, wondering whether, after all, she was not merely playing with him. One afternoon, Mousie announced her intention of calling in at Victor's on their way to the Casino. He counted the minutes until the Rolls drew up outside the shop on the Croisette. But Mousie left him to wait in the car; he had still to learn that she would never take him in with her to any establishment where the girls were young or attractive.

And yet Jacqueline was in Cannes. No doubt she had been there all along. Only the evening before he had seen her. It was after dinner at the Restaurant des Ambassadeurs. He and Mousie were dining alone. He was dancing with Mousie, when suddenly, so close that he could have touched her, he saw Jacqueline. She was dressed in the white *diamanté* dress she had worn at the Grelot and was dancing with a man who was a stranger to him, but who, he remarked with satisfaction, was elderly and unattractive. The floor was not crowded, and he felt certain she must have remarked him. But he could not catch her eye, and presently, with death in his heart (and Mousie's ample form clasped to his bosom) he saw her leave the floor while the band was yet playing. She and her partner must have gone away at once — at any rate, when Oliver escorted Mousie back to their table, the girl had disappeared.

Her face, wistful and sweet, rose before him now as he confronted the blustering wind. Voices in the garden disturbed his musing, and he saw Ribeira's large brown beard at the foot of the path. He and his sister, a listless, saddle-coloured female, addressed as Doña Isabella, were now frequent visitors at the villa.

'Dios, what a day!' exclaimed the merry Argentine, beating his plump hands together. 'Ah, my young friend, one sees well you come of a hardy race to affront this Arctic hurricane without hat or coat. Bring us quickly to a fire, I beg! Isabella and I are frozen in the bones!'

Oliver himself was not sorry now to exchange the boreal airs of the grounds for the pleasant warmth of the morning-room, where a roaring fire of olive logs took the full credit for the supplementary efforts of the hidden radiators. Mousie, in a smart red frock, was already there, feeding the Pekinese out of a saucer on the sofa.

On perceiving her, Ribeira struck an attitude. 'On such a day like this when the sun envelop his face,' he cried dithyrambically, 'it is a pleasure for the poor traveller to hot himself at the fire of your charms. Ma chère, petite Mouzee,' he went on, 'you look more beautiful than ever!'

Mrs. Hersent's pudgy face was wreathed in the coyest of smiles. 'I never saw such a one for getting round the girls as you, Ribby,' she declared delightedly. 'You're the most dangerous man on the whole Riveyeera, and I'm sure it's a good thing that Isabella here isn't your wife. She'd never keep you in order.'

Ribeira broke into his cackling laugh and with a wealth of gesture translated Mrs. Hersent's remarks into Spanish for the benefit of Doña Isabella, who, having no English, had assumed a polite smile on recognizing her name.

While they sipped their cocktails before the fire, two or three more guests joined them and they all went in to lunch. Oliver felt dull and out of sorts. He was beginning to loathe the rich meats which were served at the Villa Célandine, the dishes prepared with cream, the thick, piquant sauces, the heavy wines, that Mousie liked. Already, it seemed to him, he knew by heart the variations which Célestine rang on the different courses between the inevitable caviar and the no less inevitable ice pudding. Fortunately, he was spared the necessity of making conversation. His neighbour was the mannish woman who had so daunted Ribeira. She was an enthusiastic soliloquist and spent the whole time during lunch in describing for Oliver's benefit, card by card, the entire course of a bank she had held on the previous evening. Mousie, at the other end of the table, was completely absorbed by Ribeira, who was enjoying his food with avidity and discharging gallant remarks at her between mouthfuls.

At last they broke up. The Ribeiras stayed behind for a rubber while the other guests departed for the polo grounds. Scarcely had the bridge party settled down in the morning-room than Dominique appeared.

'The modiste of madame is there,' he announced.

'From Victor's, Dominique?' asked Mrs. Hersent, sorting out her hand.

'Yes, madame.'

'It's my new evening frock,' Mousie confided to the table at large. 'The front's all wrong. As I had this rotten cold and couldn't go in about it, they promised to send some one. I do hope it's one of their intelligent girls. Some of them are that stupid. All right, Dominique. Tell her to wait.'

From Victor's...

Oliver, browsing over 'The Daily Mail' by the fire, raised his head sharply at the words. What if it were *the* girl from Victor's? But no, such things didn't happen; such luck never came his way, especially not on a grey, unfriendly day like this, with the mistral peopling a fellow's mind with the black imps of depression. Still, the messenger would know Jacqueline. They could talk about her; that would be something...

He glanced towards the players. Fitchie, who had the most revolutionary ideas about declarations, had the misfortune to be Mousie's partner, and at that moment the companion's bid was being subjected to a ruthless inquest by her highly irritated employer, irrespective of the fact that the hand had yet to be played out. Knowing that Mrs. Hersent thought nothing of keeping a messenger waiting for two hours or so, Oliver stole away.

The hall was empty. The drawing-room door stood ajar. Pushing it open, he saw a girl seated in one of Mrs. Hersent's elaborate gilt chairs glancing through the new 'Illustration.'

It was Jacqueline.

To do deference to a client of Mrs. Hersent's importance, the great Victor had sent his most intelligent assistant.

CHAPTER XIV

MOUSIE HERSENT VERIFIES AN OLD ADAGE

On recognizing him, she quickly laid her magazine aside and stood up. Her manner was self-contained, official, as though to mark the fact that she was there in a business capacity.

A great gush of joy seemed to sweep the young man off his feet. Eagerly, he went towards her, his two hands outstretched. 'Jack!' he exclaimed. 'You? It isn't possible!'

She ignored his gesture. 'I've come from Victor's about Mrs. Hersent's frock,' she said in a toneless voice. 'Is Mrs. Hersent in?' Her air was glacial.

Her reception confused him. 'She's playing bridge,' he answered lamely. 'She won't see you for ages. Do sit down.' And then, to cover up his embarrassment, he added, 'But this room's like an ice-box. That lazy hound, Dominique, was too tired even to turn on the heat. You must be perished.' He dashed to the windows where the radiators were housed and manipulated the taps. 'There! Now we'll light the fire and be cosy.' He dropped to his knees on the hearthrug and put a match to the logs.

'Please don't light the fire for me,' the girl put in stiffly. 'I'm not in the least cold. Besides, Mrs. Hersent mightn't like it...'

'That's all right,' he retorted lightly, busy with the bellows. 'Mrs. Hersent hates cold rooms. Looking after the heating is part of my job...'

'Do you mean to say you *live* here?' she questioned.

The severity of her voice awed him. 'Well, yes,' he agreed hesitatingly, looking up at her. 'Just temporarily, you know.'

Abruptly she turned and gathered up her gloves and bag from the settee behind her. 'If Mrs. Hersent isn't ready for me now, I'll go for a walk and come back.'

The bellows fell with a crash into the fireplace. Oliver scrambled to his feet. 'What's the hurry? Do sit down. Please. I want to talk to you...'

She smiled. Her smile was icily polite. 'If you don't mind, I think I won't wait now. Perhaps you'd tell Mrs. Hersent I'll be back in half an hour. I'll leave the dress...' She indicated a cardboard box that stood against the wall.

'Look here,' he said roughly, 'you can't go away like this. What's wrong? Why didn't you turn up to swim that Sunday as you promised? And why have I seen nothing of you?'

'I'd rather not discuss it,' she replied. She moved towards the door.

Resolutely he barred the way. 'But you've got to discuss it. What have I done to offend you? At least you're bound to tell me that...'

Slim and elegant in her dark overcoat with its fox collar, she faced him. 'I don't want anything to do with you,' she said hotly. 'Now, will you please let me pass?'

'Not until you've told me what I've done...'

She had been nervously pounding her open palm with her clenched fingers, as though striving to keep her self-control. Now she turned on him, her brown eyes shining angrily, the young face imperious, hard. 'Then will you tell me what you are doing in this house?'

He faltered before her, so stern and searching was her glance. 'I'm Mrs. Hersent's secretary...'

Her expression was derisive. 'Why don't you work? You told me you were a journalist...'

'I haven't done any journalism for some years now...'

'Then you lied to me?'

He shrugged his shoulders: his face had grown rather haggard.

'That time in Paris, you told me you were correspondent of "The Day." Was that a lie, too?'

'I was working for them, but I wasn't the chief correspondent.' He glanced at her anxiously for, with a brusque movement of the shoulders, she had turned aside. 'Don't be too hard on me, Jack,' he said huskily. 'I was only a youngster and youngsters like to make themselves out more important than they are. I expect I imagined that story to buck myself up. When I met you here at Cannes and found you thought I was still a successful newspaper man — oh, it was rotten of me, but I didn't like to disillusion you. You see, I've never had a regular job, really...'

'Aren't you forgetting your position as Mrs. Hersent's secretary?'

He looked at her humbly. 'I took that only because I was down and out. I used to be a journalist, but free-lancing is heart-breaking work. One summer I struck it lucky at Deauville, and ever since — until the other day, that is — I've managed to pick up a living at the tables. But for the past five months my luck has been dead out and I was down to my last mille-note when Mrs. Hersent offered me this job. I've no intention of staying on with her indefinitely,' he added hastily. 'I thought I'd try and get a little capital together and make a fresh start...'

'Oh,' she burst out furiously, 'I see you have no shame! Do you know what they call you in Cannes? They call you "le danseur de Madame." Do you know what they say of you? They say you're the paid lover of this old woman...'

He stared at her aghast. 'My God, Jack!' he cried, 'you surely don't believe that of me? You know it's not true...'

'Not true?' she echoed scornfully, and drew herself up proudly. 'What right have you to ask any one to believe differently, when the whole of Cannes sees you dancing attendance on her, when you let her pay for your food and drink and lodging and' — her withering glance swept him from head to foot — 'perhaps your very clothes.' She broke off on a gasping sob. 'Let me tell you something. When I met you again the other day, I felt towards you as I felt when, a wretched little brat in Paris all those years ago, I lost my heart to you. Like a fool I believed I should find you still decent and — and... chivalrous and... and clean, as you used to be. Even when you wanted to carry me off to your room, like any woman from the streets, I made excuses for you to myself because I still thought of you as the dream-lover I've cherished all these years in my heart, the memory to which I've always tried to be true. I was so happy to meet you again. That's why I let you kiss me the other night. And to think that all the time you were the paid plaything of a disgusting old woman, who's old enough to be your grandmother, who slobbers over you in public as she slobbers over that nasty little dog of hers! If you had any shame at all, you would never have insulted me with the hired kisses of a common gigolo...'

An inarticulate ejaculation — something between a gasp and a scream — suddenly resounded through the room. Oliver whipped round in a panic with a fatal presentiment of the sight which was to meet his eyes.

Mrs. Hersent, her face a livid mask of fury, stood in the doorway.

CHAPTER XV

... AND HEARS A HOME TRUTH

For one moment of awful silence rage seemed to choke Mrs. Hersent's utterance. She made strangulated noises in her throat, not unlike the chronic, asthmatic wheezing of her beloved Pekinese which she clutched squirming to her bosom.

'Vous... vous...' she burst out at length. 'Qu'est-ce que vous dites?' Then her French, never Mousie's strong point, failed her. 'How dare you!' she screeched in English, 'you insulting little slut! Who the hell d'you think you are, coming here and slandering me behind my back?

'So I'm a "disgusting old woman," am I, you dirty little monkey?' she cackled. 'And I keep a gigolo, do I, my girl? And who are you, may I make so bold as to enquire, to pass remarks on me if I do choose to pick a feller out of the gutter, as you might say, and feed and lodge him and give him a good time, because I'm soft-hearted and he's down on his luck? Get out of my house, d'you hear me, you rotten, low-down, little French rat, you!'

Now, Oliver, who had been struck dumb by the unexpectedness of the intrusion, interposed vigorously. 'Look here, Mousie, you can't say things like that. Let me explain...'

'I don't want to hear anything from you,' she shut him up. 'Ungrateful wretch! I'll talk to you in a minute. What has *she* got to say? Let *her* explain...'

Pale and rather defiant, the girl stood like a statue and contemplated her with smouldering eyes. 'I'm afraid I lost my temper,' she said at last. 'I'm sorry — I didn't know you were listening...'

Her words provoked another explosion. Mrs. Hersent gave vent to a loud, wailing cry. 'You didn't know I was listening?' she repeated, and broke into a shrill fit of weeping. 'You were plotting with him against me. And you,' she blubbered stormily, rounding on Oliver, 'after all I've done for you, you stood there and allowed her to tell falsehoods about me? I'm not an old woman; it's not true! Look at my figure' — she spread-eagled her stumpy arms — 'everybody says how girlish I am. And you yourself told me I was like a princess in my silver frock. Oh' — and she uplifted her voice in a plaintive wail — 'you're all alike, a lot of thankless good-for-nothings, a pack of double-faces!'

During this harangue Ribeira's brown beard had been visible hovering in the background. The Argentine now came forward. He made a covert sign to Oliver to get the girl away while he set about pacifying the lachrymose and almost hysterical Mrs. Hersent.

'There, there, Mouzee,' he said purringly, 'you must not cry. All your friends are very fond of you...'

'Oh, Ribby,' ejaculated the lady in another deluge of tears, 'you're the only one I can trust!' And she nestled her large and hamlike face against Ribeira's patriarchal beard.

Meanwhile, Jack had crossed to the door. When she was level with Mrs. Hersent she halted and, although Ribeira signalled desperately to her to be gone, she stood her ground. 'Madame,' she said in a low voice, 'I shouldn't have said what I did. I beg of you to excuse me. I am sorry.'

Mrs. Hersent raised her head abruptly. With a firm motion of her hand she removed the short and fat figure of the Argentine from her path. Her mouth was ugly. 'Sorry, is it?' she repeated threateningly. 'Aye, and I wager you'll be sorrier, my lass, before I've done with you. I know your face, don't I? I've seen you at Victor's. What's your name?'

'Jacqueline, madame.'

'Jacqueline what?'

'Jacqueline Morrisot.'

'So? And what do you suppose Mr. Victor's going to say when he hears you've been carrying on with your lover in a customer's private house?'

'Mousie...' began Oliver, attempting to spring forward. But Ribeira's fingers had closed on his arm, holding him in a steelly grip.

'Basta!' the fat man hissed in his ear. 'Would you make it worse for her?'

The girl reddened angrily. 'You've no right to say that,' she answered Mrs. Hersent with dignity. 'It's not true...'

The mistress of the house snorted. 'Not true, isn't it? Didn't I hear you tell him with my own ears that you'd let him kiss you? D'you suppose I don't know that you followed him here to try and set him against me with a pack of lies?'

The girl hesitated, pressing her small hands together. Then she said quietly: 'I didn't even know that Mr. Royce was staying in your house. I brought your frock from Victor's. In any case, Mr. Royce is nothing to me...'

'You wanted to get him back, wasn't that it?' Mrs. Hersent insisted, drowning her voice. 'You're jealous of me, eh?'

From top to toe the slight figure scanned her, from the mass of peroxide ringlets crowning the heavy, inflamed face to the thick feet which, in their gauzy stockings, looked as if they had been poured into the smart patent-leather shoes and then inflated. 'It's no business of mine if Mr. Royce chooses to put himself in a false position. I merely told him that he ought to be ashamed of himself to sponge on a rich woman twice his age instead of earning his own living. That is the truth, and if you and he don't mind people saying that he's just a gigolo you hire to dance with you and... and all the rest, that's your affair. I don't care what you do...'

'You don't care, don't you?' Mrs. Hersent screeched. 'You'll soon find out whether you care or not, you baggage! I'll learn you your place, my fine lady! I'll have you sacked, d'you hear? Flung back on the pavement where you belong! And if Victor don't do as I say, I'll change my dressmaker!'

A smooth laugh suddenly snapped the tension in the room. The girl seemed to have regained her equanimity. She closed her eyes and laughed consumedly, as though the result of her scrutiny filled her with merriment. 'In that case, you'd better get an upholsterer,' she said, and, putting up her handkerchief in her bag, which she closed with a crisp snap, she walked to the door.

'Upholst...'

With an hysterical shriek Mrs. Hersent collapsed in a chair. The girl was gone.

'Jack!' Oliver cried out and sprinted after her. He caught her in the hall. 'Stop!' he panted. 'You can't go like this! What are you going to do?'

She whipped round on him savagely. He recoiled before the anger of her eyes. 'Don't you dare to speak to me!' she said. 'I never want to see you again!'

The front door banged.

As if awaking from a dream, the young man became aware of his reflection staring at him out of the mirror in the hall. For a full minute he contemplated his features, then, passing his hand across his eyes as though to efface the vision the mirror had shown him, he walked swiftly upstairs to his room, where, with a sort of desperate haste, he began to pack his few possessions.

His packing done, he shut his suitcase and, carrying it, moved to the door. He paused and, putting down his bag, he took his letter-case from his pocket, removed from it a five-hundred-franc note, the only money it contained. This he slipped into an envelope, addressed it to 'Mrs. Hersent' and propped it against the paper-stand. Then, carrying his suitcase, he went quietly downstairs.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GREAT VICTOR LOOKS THE OTHER WAY

Jacqueline walked back to Cannes. It was more than a mile to Victor's shop on the Croisette and she could have taken the tram, which was the way she had come. But she did not think of it. Her sole impulse was to put the Villa Célandine behind her as speedily as might be.

She craved physical action to carry her out of the orbit of these odious people, to relax her overwrought nerves, to enable her to collect her mind. It was quite dark already, and the icy wind stabbed the ill-lit obscurity of the Route de Fréjus, whirling up the dust in clouds from the broken cobbles, the battered and neglected tram-rails. The raw breath of the mistral, buffeting her cheek, invigorated her. She felt attuned to the evening's boisterous mood and, driven as she was before the wind of Fate, yielded herself up exultingly to the gale's stormy embrace.

A tram passed her. It was lurching Canneswards, spilling the light from its windows athwart the darkling, unfriendly street. On the rear platform a young man balanced himself, a suitcase at his feet, his features set and stony. Plunged in meditation, he did not remark the slight figure sturdily struggling along the pavement in the mistral's merciless grip. She, on her side, did not raise her eyes as, with clang of bell and thump of bogeys, the tram swept by.

Now the curve of the street brought the lamps of the rue Georges Clemenceau in view. The clocks pointed to as near five o'clock as makes no difference in a part of

France, where the correct hour is never anything more definite than a mean struck between the ingenious guesses of the available timepieces. Involuntarily she slackened her pace. What now? Victor's did not close until six. What should she do? Was she going back to the shop? Had Mrs. Hersent telephoned, or would that irate dame descend upon Monsieur Victor in person?

Jack shivered slightly. Of a sudden it seemed to her that the wind struck chill. What was going to happen to her? She had burnt her boats. Mrs. Hersent was one of Victor's best customers: she spent money lavishly and had sent all her friends to the shop; there was not much doubt about her being able to make good her threat.

What would Victor do? Jack was fully conscious of her usefulness to her employer. But she was under no illusions as to his character. All too well she knew his propensity to shirk a disagreeable decision. He would never have the courage to stand up to Mrs. Hersent, especially if, as the gossip ran, he had been losing at the tables of late. He was only too likely to take refuge behind his staff, try to throw the decision upon anybody willing to assume the responsibility. That meant... Madame Monnet.

Madame Monnet was bitterly and implacably hostile. Jack knew that the saleswoman had tried to set Victor against her, and the fact that her intrigues had proved ineffectual made her all the more rancorous. With the curious insularity of the French which any emotional stress is apt to bring out, she never spoke of Jack except as 'cette Anglaise.' It had long since been borne in upon Jack that only Victor's protection stood between her and swift dismissal, if Madame Monnet had her way.

The season was past its height. None of the dress establishments would be taking on any extra hands now. Besides, news spread fast in their little world of frocks, and Madame Monnet would take good care to see that the whole story became known.

She was not beaten yet, Jacqueline told herself. Her job was worth fighting for. There was only one thing for it: she must try and see Victor before Mrs. Hersent, before Madame Monnet, got at him. Victor was usually at the shop up till five in the afternoon; after that he was mostly to be found at the Casino. She would seek him out there and give the shop a miss. After all she had gone through that afternoon, she did not feel capable of facing another scene.

This afternoon the Casino daunted her a little. The *thé dansant* was in full swing in the restaurant and the vestibule was crowded, many of the men in flannels or golfing clothes, some of the women in tailor-mades, others elaborately gowned for the afternoon, but all intent on pleasure, on dancing, gambling, love-making, gossip. Jack had her card to the gaming-rooms — supplied by Victor's. Often, in the cocktail hour, as at present, after her work at the shop was over for the day, she would change into one of the smart models Victor allowed her to wear and run into the rooms for a little, to show her frock, to chat with her innumerable acquaintances and hear the gossip, and to keep an eye open for any pretty clothes that happened to be worn.

As a rule, she was confident, at her ease. No society woman, she knew, would venture into the rooms alone. But she felt herself a privileged person. No one — no one that amounted to anything, that is to say — would rank her with the prowling cocottes. All the men knew

Jacqueline from Victor's, and liked to talk to her, even though the most she would accept from them would be a glass of orange juice, in lieu of a cocktail, at the bar.

But to-day she felt self-conscious, embarrassed even, as she passed through the turnabout door and met the familiar tense hush that hung like a curtain across the threshold of the gaming-rooms.

Greetings distracted her attention from her quest. Baron Steyn, all nose and cigar, stacking a pile of ten-thousand-franc counters at the big table, caught her eye and kissed the tips of his fingers to her; an Egyptian prince asked her when she was coming out to Mandelieu to ride his polo ponies; the Vicomte de Cabriac, who was with a youngish man who looked like an American, stopped her and introduced his friend as Mr. Harvey Nolan. 'This old Nolan,' he confided to her, 'has a yacht in the harbour, such a beauty! I make him invite you to tea, n'est-ce pas, Harvey?'

'The Alba can run to a cocktail, even,' said the American, 'though I have to shake 'em myself, since I fired that drunken steward of mine. You've certainly got to bring Miss...'

'Jack,' prompted the Vicomte. 'You've got to call her "Jack," the same as everybody else.'

'Jack, then,' Nolan amended. 'Which reminds me: isn't it time we had a small one now?'

They dragged Jack off to the bar. She accompanied them because she thought Victor might be there, and she did not ever go to the Casino bar alone. But Victor was not among the noisy throng massed about the long counter, and having swallowed her *jus d'orange*, Jack made an excuse and slipped away.

She resumed her stroll. Fresh acquaintances came up to her, but she shook them off, her eyes always on the groups about the tables.

At last she caught sight of Victor's shining bald pate. His squat and dapper figure was discernible among the crowd at the big table just inside the brass rails. Looking peevish and rather glum, the dressmaker was watching the play. She made straight for him, but, before she could reach him, he turned to speak to a man at his side, thrust his arm through the other's, and walked away.

She could not tell whether he had seen her or not, but she had the feeling that he had. Her heart began to thump; she must make sure.

She found him, his beautifully shaped hands with fingers nervously flexed stretched straight before him on the green baize, between a full-blown German woman covered with sham jewellery and Harvey Nolan, the American she had met with De Cabriac. A vague man in *pince-nez* at the end of the table had the shoe and was dealing to the German. The usual current of desultory chaff ran round. All eyes swerved to the German as the dealer flipped out the cards. Nolan made a *sotto voce* remark to Victor, whose impassive features relaxed into a sardonic smile.

Then silence, while the florid lady turned up her hand. 'Huit!' chanted the *croupier* in his monotonous voice, and forthwith his rake came into action. The tension evaporated in a sigh of relief, a buzz of voices rippling from seat to seat.

Nolan looked up and caught sight of Jack. 'Hey, there!' he cried jovially, 'want to run a bank with me?'

Jack shook her head, smiling. But her gaze was not for him. She was watching Victor. Breathlessly, with an expectancy that gnawed like an aching tooth. She saw him swing about; then his glance met hers.

This time she could not be mistaken. The smooth, egg-like face hardened on the instant, the sensitive mouth stiffened into a straight, obstinate line, the narrow eyes contracted in a stony stare. Always, when their ways crossed like this, at business or outside, he had for her a special little smile, patronizing but warm and friendly and rather enigmatic, as though they shared a secret. But now there was no hint of kindness, of recognition even, in his deliberate, frozen regard.

She left the rooms and the Casino, prepared to face the worst.

It was waiting for her when she reached her *pension.* Albert, the chasseur from Victor's, was kicking his heels in the hall. 'A good little half-hour I wait for you already, Mad'moiselle Jack,' he told her. 'Madame Monnet wants to see you urgently. You are to come at once.'

CHAPTER XVII

JACQUELINE HAS A CALLER

MADAME MONNET'S words of dismissal rang in Jack's ears when, on the following day, she faced the problem of finding another job. Her heart was not in the task. To be dismissed, paid up to date and bundled out, unheard and without appeal — she felt humiliated, rebellious.

Nevertheless, to find out how the land lay, she went to the telephone after breakfast. She had various acquaintances in the Cannes branches of the big Paris dress shops: from one or other of them, she told herself, she must surely hear of an opening. Her first call was to a man designer she knew at one of the most exclusive establishments — he had always been friendly towards her and for the moment she felt she had had enough of feminine pettiness.

But Monsieur Claude's attitude towards her, when he heard of the nature of her business, proved, in the upshot, to be typical of the attitude of all to whom she applied. The initial warmth of his greeting was clearly addressed to Mademoiselle Jacqueline, the great Victor's particular pet. His tone was appreciably cooler when he learned that she was no longer in favour, and was, in fact, looking for work. Murmuring that trade was slack and that, *enfin*, it was very difficult, he referred her to the forewoman. And so with two or three others that she tried.

She made the round of the dress shops, steeling herself against the whispers and knowing smiles of the *ateliers* that showed her story had preceded her. She had the same experience everywhere. The season was ebbing fast: no fresh staff was being engaged. Oliver Royce, she heard on returning home on the second evening, had called, and she left word with the servant, if he called again, always to say she was out. The caution was unnecessary, for she was away all day on her hopeless, heart-breaking quest.

On the third evening it was past seven by the time she arrived back at the boarding-house. As she was getting her latchkey out of her bag, the front door opened and her fellow lodger, the Russian taxi-driver, emerged. He was customarily on night duty and his leather coat and leggings indicated that he was now on his way to take over his cab.

'Day meets Night,' he remarked gallantly, laying his hand to his cap in a military salute. 'You have put the sun to bed: I go to drive the chariot of dawn. You are late, Mad'moiselle Jack. Dinner is nearly over and a most impatient cavalier awaits you...'

She felt the colour come into her face. Royce, was her instant thought. 'Some one for me?' she faltered.

'Yes,' he replied, gaily taking off her impressive manner. 'But, lest you should be disappointed, let me tell you it is no one worthy of that delicious blush.'

She laughed. She liked this Russian, who looked and spoke like a gentleman, yet performed his menial work with unflagging cheerfulness: she was used to his nonsense.

'I don't believe there's any one there at all,' she said. 'You're making it up...'

He stepped back. 'Walk into the salon and see for yourself...'

She recoiled hastily. 'Listen, M. Boris,' she said.

'Slip in and see that the salon door is closed so that I can get up to my room. I don't want to meet this young man...'

'Ah, ha,' he broke in with a gusty laugh. 'I told you you would be disappointed. This is no young man, my dear. It is not Apollo, but Bacchus, who has come calling on the nymph, a veritable Silenus, paunch, beard, and everything. Tiens, behold the God of Wine himself! I leave you, Mad'moiselle Jack, or I shall be late at the garage.' He touched his cap to her and ran down the stairs.

A short, stout, bearded man bulked big in the doorway. At the sight of him the girl stiffened. She recognized him immediately: he had been present at the scene at the Villa Célandine. Now that she looked at him more closely, she remembered having seen him at Victor's. He had come in with his sister, one of the clients that Mrs. Hersent had sent them.

He was bowing before her. 'My name is Ribeira,' he said. 'I wanted to have a few minutes' conversation with you. Is there any place where we can talk quietly?'

He effaced himself to let her pass. Rather slowly she led the way through the hall to a small writing-room in the rear. The smell of cooking in the air and the rattle of plates and the sound of voices from the dining-room suggested that, for the time being, they were in no danger of being disturbed by her fellow lodgers.

He closed the door and came over to where she stood under the centre bunch of electric lights.

'They dismissed you, eh?' he said crisply.

She nodded, waiting.

'I was afraid of it,' he rejoined. 'I had a word with Victor. He would hear nothing on your behalf. He's very set against you and washes his hands of the whole affair...'

'It wasn't my fault,' she broke in indignantly. 'I was to blame to start with, I know. But afterwards I made what amends I could. I answered back only when she insulted me.'

His eyes glinted humorously behind their glasses. 'I know,' he said soothingly. 'But there are some gibes, from one woman to another...' He stopped short, eyeing her critically through his goggles. 'And what plans have you made, my little one? The season is past its prime: you'll not find another job here.'

She shrugged her shoulders proudly. 'I shall return to Paris,' she replied. Then, remembering that he was a friend of Mrs. Hersent, she added, 'I have a place offered to me.' Always keep your end up...

Fingering his beard, he mustered her with an abstracted air. She saw that he was not deceived. 'What I came to tell you was this,' he said at length. 'My sister — perhaps you remember my escorting her once to Victor's — is lonely here, away from all her friends in Buenos Ayres — we are Argentines, you know. She wants a companion. Why not come to us? You will brighten her up. You are young, you are intelligent, you speak English as well as French. We travel a good deal — you would, of course, go with us. My sister does not speak a word of English, and your English would be useful when we go to New York.'

'You are very kind, monsieur,' she answered hesitatingly. 'But why should you take this trouble on my account? And what will Mrs. Hersent say? Have you thought of that?'

He made a deprecatory gesture as though to say 'You can leave her to me.' 'We will not disturb ourselves about Mrs. Hersent. She and I are old friends. She will get over it. I have come to you because I believe you were unjustly treated and because, frankly, I think you will suit us.' He beamed at her jovially. 'Something tells me you are going to accept.'

'I should like to,' she answered candidly. 'But Mademoiselle your sister, is she agreeable?'

'Pouf! she'll be only too pleased. But don't decide now. Lunch with us to-morrow at the Grand Hotel and we'll talk it over, just the three of us together. And we'll go into the matter of terms.' He smiled at her encouragingly. 'We shan't quarrel about them, I'm sure. Apropos,' he added, as an afterthought, 'my sister is rather old-fashioned. She is likely to ask for references...'

The girl smiled rather bitterly. 'I have an old reference from Madame Delly where I used to work. But I'm afraid I can't hope for a reference from Victor's. In fact, Madame Monnet — that's the manageress — told me she would see that I didn't get one...'

'Bah!' declaimed the Argentine, 'don't worry your head about that! Those are not the sort of references I was thinking of. I only meant that my sister would naturally be anxious to know something about you, who your parents were and that sort of thing.'

She looked rather crestfallen. 'For that, monsieur, I fear the answer will not be very satisfactory.' She paused. 'You see, I never knew my father. To be frank with you, I don't know who my father was. And I lost my mother through a strange and terrible tragedy...'

Her spirits sank to zero. She felt she had ruined her chances. His air had grown rather severe as he eyed her in silence, plucking at his beard with a gesture familiar to him. But all of a sudden his habitual geniality returned, and, patting her shoulder in a paternal way, he said: 'Never mind about that now. We will go into everything to-morrow. But bring any papers you have... you know, in case my sister asks questions. And you may be sure I think none the worse of you for speaking the truth. Till to-morrow then. We lunch at one-fifteen...' Then, perceiving her serious air, he nudged her jovially and added: 'And if I tell you that everything will be all right, little imbecile, that your engagement is as good as settled, will that bring a smile to your face?'

His dark eyes twinkled into hers and she sought to smile. But the tears were very near the surface and her mouth twitched as she said: 'I feel more like crying than smiling. It is so very kind of you to have thought of me...'

'And is that any way of showing your gratitude?' he demanded gruffly. 'Come, my little Jack, what used the brave d'Artagnan say? Courage, my friend, the devil is dead! Ah, that's better. Then we'll see you to-morrow, and in the mean time, if you'll take my advice, you'll put that old woman out of your head!'

So saying, he nodded to her brightly, and, donning his large black felt hat with a flourish, waddled away.

Jack saw him to the door, then went to her room. She had no thought of dinner. Entranced, bewildered by the sudden turn her fortunes had taken, she wanted to be alone to think. Only now did she realize how utterly the final interview with Madame Monnet had crushed her. She could scarcely believe her luck, to fall out of one job straight into another one. And such a job! These Ribeiras must be rich, since the sister was a customer at Victor's and they lived at the Grand: probably they had a car and a chauffeur. To live with them, to be of their world, to travel with them, signified for her a definite break with the past. It meant passing from one side of the counter to the other. Henceforward she would be looking at the life she had quitted from the outside.

CHAPTER XVIII

TWO LETTERS

Ribeira laid aside his cigar, popped his big horn glasses on his nose, rubbed his hands together, and cried briskly: 'And now, my little Jack, to business!'

They were in the sitting-room of the Ribeiras' suite at the Grand Hotel. They had lunched in the spacious, rather ornate apartment looking out over the long green hotel gardens, with a glimpse of the Croisette, with its flashing cars, and the sea at the end. Doña Isabella, at Ribeira's suggestion, had left them when the meal was done — she did very much as her brother told her, it seemed to Jack.

'You have seen my sister,' said Ribeira. 'How do you like her?'

'I'm sure we shall get on together,' Jack replied warmly. 'I think she's so kind.'

It was difficult to find an adjective more definite to describe this languid Latin's complete inoffensiveness. Her age was indeterminate, but Jack surmised that she was younger than she looked. Like so many women of Spanish stock, she seemed to have wilted early, and now, with her lack-lustre eyes and sunken features, she produced the impression of a person permanently *in articulo mortis.* She spoke little, and it appeared to Jack that she was rather cowed by her brother.

'Now, then, as to terms,' Ribeira continued. 'What did you get at Victor's?'

'My salary was eight hundred francs a month,' she answered. 'But with commissions I have made as much as fifteen hundred. Of course, I shouldn't expect that...'

'I will give you a thousand francs a month,' he broke in. 'Your board and lodging are, of course, included. Isabella has already enquired about your room. You can have one on this corridor, opposite ours. Are the conditions all right?'

'They are much too generous. At Victor's I had to keep myself out of my wages. I'm sure that with...'

'Basta!' he interrupted, 'the affair is settled. Provided always that the references are satisfactory. You brought your papers?'

'Of course.' She opened her bag and began hunting through it, eventually producing a sheaf of documents. 'My certificate from the convent where I was at school...'

He laughed. 'We'll pass that one...'

'My reference from Delly's where I was apprenticed...'

He took the paper from her. '"Punctual, honest, intelligent, and obedient,"' he read out. 'My little Jack, you have all the virtues.' He laid the paper down and put out his hand. 'Next?'

'My birth certificate,' she said; she passed the slip across. 'Perhaps I ought to explain. You'll see there that I was registered as the daughter of Célie Richard and Robert Morris, known as Morrisot...' She glanced rather apprehensively into the bearded face at her side, enigmatic behind the big glasses. 'He was a clown, you know. But a very famous one in his day. He was an Englishman, really. Robert Morris, that was his proper name. Morrisot was only his circus name. Everybody thought a lot of him. People used to come to the bar — "Chez Morrisot's" he called it; he opened it when he broke his leg in the ring and had to retire; I was brought up there — just so as to be able to say they'd had a drink with Morrisot. Lucien Guitry was there once — you've heard of Lucien Guitry?'

'Oh, yes...'

'He said that Dad — that was what I always called Morrisot — could teach them all to act. He must have had a great reputation in his day. The papers had columns about him when he died. You know' — she hesitated — 'you know, that he and my mother were murd...'

He did not suffer her to finish the phrase. 'I know,' he said. And, seeing the surprise in her face, he added: 'You must understand, my little Jack, that I've been making a few enquiries about you...'

'Of course...'

'And these other papers,' he asked, touching them, 'what are they?'

'Two letters my mother left. About the man we think was my father...'

'May I see them?'

She hesitated. These two faded sheets were all that survived of the passion that had given her the breath of life. Célie, shadowy figure in the high-necked white silk blouse, which from the cash-desk of Chez Morrisot's seemed to dominate the whole of her childhood, was her mother. Yet she had no memory of any tenderness existing between them to make her think back upon this cold and self-contained woman, who had managed them all at the little bar, with a sentiment stronger than an overwhelming sense of pity for her tragic fate. All the same, to disclose these letters to strange eyes seemed to her to be like violating a confidence. Yet she was loath to offend this man who had befriended her, who clearly meant so well. Silently, she gave him the letters.

He took the topmost one of the two, began to read it, then pushed up his spectacles and pressed his fingers against his eyeballs.

'This bright Riviera light hurts my eyes,' he said. 'Read me the letters, I beg, my little one.'

'The other one comes first,' the girl explained. 'It's to Célie, written by the man we believe to have been my father. But you shall judge for yourself. It's in English — do you understand English?'

'Yes, yes,' said Ribeira testily. He leaned back in his armchair and closed his eyes.

'The letter,' Jack pointed out, 'was written from the South-Western Hotel at Southampton in England, and is dated the twenty-third of May, 1906 — that's to say, eight months before I was born.' She read out in English:

Célie dear,

I don't know what you will think of me, nothing very good, I guess. But the family are too much for us. Uncle Geoff swears he will have me shut up as a lunatic if I don't go back with them. He has booked our reservations by the Adriatic, sailing tomorrow. I'm just crazed worrying about you, dear. But what am I to do? I see nothing but trouble ahead if we go on with it. I promised not even to write you again, but I had to, this once, dear. Uncle Geoff swears they are going to do the right thing by you, and I expect it's better so. You were always worth ten of me, anyway. We were happy together, weren't we, dear? — but I guess it was too good to last.

Good-bye, kid; you'll have to try and forget and so shall I. Who the hell wants to be rich anyway?

VIN

The girl stopped. Ribeira opened his eyes. 'How was the signature?' he demanded.

'"Vin." They say it's short for Vincent. He was an American, they think — you know, from American expressions in the letter...'

'Who thinks? Who's "they"?'

'The lawyer who acted for me, Maître Beauval, his name is.'

Ribeira grunted. 'Read the other letter,' he bade her.

'This one is in French,' said Jack. 'It's not signed, but it's in Célie's handwriting. The first line makes it clear that it's her reply to the letter I've just read, though it's dated four years later. It's a copy: she's written on it, "Copy of my letter of the 11th September, 1910"...'

The dividing door between the sitting-room and the adjoining bedroom opened and Doña Isabella appeared. 'The chauffeur is there with the car,' she announced in French.

Ribeira frowned. With his glasses off, he looked less benevolent: his eyes, shrewd and sharp, were set too close together. At present they sparkled rather forbiddingly. 'Didn't I tell you I didn't wish to be disturbed?' he replied in the same language.

Doña Isabella, Jack decided, was clearly not a person to take a hint. 'But the porter has sent up twice to know whether there are any orders for the man,' she persisted mildly.

Ribeira bounced upright in his chair and let fly at her with a volley of Spanish. Jack, who did not understand a word, felt sorry for Doña Isabella, who seemed to bow and tremble before the onslaught like a tall flower before the wind. Her brownish face went a shade darker and she bit her lip and made little, vague, deprecatory gestures of the hands. 'C'est bien, c'est bien,' she murmured at length when, on a final rasping guttural, Ribeira had cast himself back in his chair, and she fairly scuttled from the room.

With a grunt Ribeira cleared his throat and reached for his cigar. 'Go on,' he ordered Jack as he struck a light. The girl read out in French:

Mon Chéri,

I never answered your letter from Southampton. There was nothing to say. We had had our moment and we were happy while it lasted, were we not? And your uncle was very generous. Because I am appreciative of what he did for me on your behalf, I now write to tell you that, should any one approach him or you demanding money for me or the child, you are to understand he has no authority from me and you are to pay him nothing, nothing, not a sou. Only the fear that you might think me a blackmailer, and that the thought would disfigure the portrait of me which I like to think you carry in your heart from those old days leads me to break the silence of all these years. Pay no attention, then, to any demands you may receive, and believe, I supplicate you, my best beloved, that I am free from guilt in any such horrible conspiracy. I hope you are well and happy. Little Jack grows so big. She will be four next January. I wish she meant more to me. But she is always there to make me remember. And I have, like you, to forget. Good-bye and good luck. Remember, not a sou.

A silence so profound followed upon the reading of the second letter that for a moment Jack thought Ribeira had fallen asleep. He lay back sprawling in the big club chair, his cigar stuck in one corner of his mouth, his hands folded across his large stomach. Suddenly, without opening his eyes, he spoke.

'You say the lawyer has had these letters?'

'Yes...'

'He should have been able to trace this fellow...'

'He told me he made enquiries, but they led to no result.'

The Argentine sat up, knocked the ash off his cigar against his coffee-cup, and dusted some fragments from his waistcoat. 'We go to Paris to-morrow,' he announced. 'I will see this imbecile for you myself.'

Jack looked rather dismayed. 'Then you won't want to engage me just yet?'

'On the contrary, you're coming with us...'

She began to stammer her thanks, but he cut her off short. 'You'll be useful to Isabella,' he declared. 'You've seen what she's like. No head.' He gathered up Jack's papers from the table and rose from his chair. 'I'd better take charge of these. Where's your Maître Beauval to be found?'

'At 224 bis, Boulevard des Capucines,' she told him.

He produced a little book from his pocket and made a note. 'By the way,' he remarked as he put up his notebook, 'there is one thing, perhaps, I should mention. I ask you no questions regarding the young man in whose company I saw you at Mrs. Hersent's. But, in the circumstances, I think it would be better if you avoided him in future...'

Jack blushed furiously. 'I can promise you that, monsieur,' she declared warmly.

He gave her hand a little paternal pat. 'C'est bien. Now Isabella shall drive you in the car to your *pension* to pick up your things. Believe me, little Jack, we shall do our best to make you happy.'

His equanimity was quite restored, his smile radiant, expansive. Jack, enured to the temperamental gusts of the fitting-rooms at Victor's, had already forgotten his outburst. She decided that she was going to like Monsieur Ribeira very much.

CHAPTER XIX

INTRODUCING, SOMEWHAT UNEXPECTEDLY, MR. DAN O'HALLORAN

MID-CARNIVAL was over.

Two hours since the procession of illuminated boats had mysteriously melted into the black velvet of the night; the last firework had plunged hissing into the sea; and the romantic outline of the old church on the summit of Mont Chevalier, which had briefly flamed a vermilion farewell to Carnival, had receded into the darkness, leaving only the illuminated clock-face of the slender belfry to glow down like a yellow eye upon the town at its foot.

Now the lights were quenched; the music, the laughter, the scrape of feet, the crack of the shooting-galleries under the trees, was hushed; the last mask had forsaken the sea-front. Only posies trodden underfoot, wilted mimosa sprays, scattered petals — the dead of the afternoon's battle — and a prodigious powdering of confetti, as though a polychromatic snowfall had blanketed the town, lingered as mementoes, dusty and begrimed, of the mortality of the flesh.

But behind the elaborate façade which Cannes of the Casino turns to the foreigner, in the narrow ways which still whisper of the little sunbaked fishing-port that, sleeping between sea and mountain, met the imperious eye of the Eagle flown from Elba, all that hot Provençal life that recks nothing of the morrow's ashes yet pulsated fiercely. Up in the Suquet, that labyrinth of winding lanes that clamber up and down the slopes of Mont Chevalier, it was as though King Carnival, hard-pressed, had sought a last refuge here among the swarthy, warm-blooded, and violent-minded descendants of the Barbary raiders, of whom this is the lair. Over the wineshops, arch-roofed and vaulted and open to the street, disclosing a glimpse of mighty tuns lining the walls within, Chinese lanterns glowed. Troops of masks, hand-in-hand, raced joyously up and down the steep lanes. There was laughter everywhere, laughter and music, gramophones and automatic pianos and mandolines, blending their strains in one braying, ear-racking cacophony.

The night was mild and windless and warmed with the promise of the early Riviera spring. Under the street-lamp by the fountain, where, of a morning, the Suquet housewives gather to draw water, wash clothes, and gossip in the sunshine, a man with a guitar was singing. They were flocking from the swarming hovels all about to hear his song, which was a celebrated Provençal serenade, the 'Cansoun de Magali.' Above the thrumming of the strings the singer's voice, a mellow and insinuating baritone, soared out upon the balmy air:

'O Magali, ma tant' amado,
Mette le testo au fenestroun,
Esconto un paura questo aubado
De tambourin e de violoun!'

In a tiny eating-house near by, packed to suffocation, a young man, who sat in the open doorway over the remains of a meal, turned from the clamour of the crowded tables, the greasy odours of garlic and saffron, to listen to the song. The waitress, a strapping wench with pitch-black hair gleaming with olive oil, was making out his bill. She knew him for a foreigner, not from his French, which was faultless, but from his air of aloofness among the simple merriment going on all around. So, with a mischievous flash of her magnificent dark eyes and a backward motion of the head towards the throng about the fountain, she laughed and said: 'Pas compris, ça?'

Morosely he shook his head.

'It's Provençal,' she explained confidentially. 'A song about love. A man is telling this girl, Magali, to come to the window and hear his music. Attendez...!'

She took up the words as the song proceeded, singing them in a quiet, husky voice:

'Mai li estello paliran
Quand te veiran!'

she crooned and broke off to add: 'I tell you what it means. "The stars," says this lover to Magali, "the stars will pale when they see you." C'est joli, ça, n'est-ce pas?' But then she shrugged her shoulders expressively and murmured, 'Merci, m'sieu!' For this pleasant-looking young man with the crisp blond hair had laid some money on the table and strode out abruptly.

Oliver Royce had not come up to the Suquet to hear love-songs. They were part of the past from which he had made up his mind to get away. That afternoon at the Villa Célandine — how long since it seemed, though it was only a fortnight ago! — when he had looked at himself in the mirror in the hall, something came into his mind that he had once heard his disreputable English acquaintance, Major Wetherton, say. The confession had been made in a moment of maudlin confidence, but it was none the less true for that. 'What's wrong with me, son,' the Major had said, 'is that I've been too long on the Riviera. I've gone native, boy!'

Well, he wouldn't go native, Oliver had resolved, wondering the while within himself whether his own moral fibre had already been sapped by the sunshine and the flowers, the beauty of sea and mountain, of this earthly paradise, whether he himself had not degenerated beyond recall in this Cytherean atmosphere of money easily got and more easily spent, of love bought and sold. To make a clean cut with it all, he had deliberately exiled himself from the Cannes of the Croisette and Casino and sought a haven, aloof from the invader, among the aborigines.

For a fortnight now he had been looking for work, and he had still found nothing. The newspaper jobs were all bestowed, and although the correspondents upon whom he called were friendly enough, none held out much hope of employment. At the registry offices, where he put his name down as private secretary, as courier, as chauffeur even, they told him that he had applied too late — everybody was suited; and the fact that his advertisement in the 'Éclaireur' elicited no replies appeared to support this contention. He could probably have got himself attached as professional dancer to one of the big hotels, to the Casino even. No. No more parasite posts for him. That way 'going native' lay...

Yet his money was running out, and he saw no means of replenishing it. He had spent this, the fourteenth day of his quest, like the rest, tramping round in answer to advertisements in the 'Éclaireur.' He had been to six different addresses, one as far afield as Golfe Juan, but without success. Either the position was already disposed of, or qualifications such as bookkeeping or shorthand were demanded; and he possessed neither. He had given lunch a miss for economy's sake and had stayed his hunger on the way home with a plate of spaghetti and half a litre of cheap red wine at this little eating-house he had discovered. No sooner had he ordered his food, however, than he was sorry he had gone there. The Carnival gaiety jarred on him, and this haunting love romance breathed to the stars to the plaintive ringing of a guitar — it had been the last straw...

He had not seen Jacqueline since that afternoon at the villa: he felt he would never see her again. That same evening, after he had quitted the Villa Célandine for good and all, he had written to Mousie to intercede for the girl. All next day he waited in a fever for the answer that never came, and the following morning called at Victor's, to learn that the worst had happened. With considerable curtness he was informed that Mademoiselle Jacqueline was no longer employed there. Not that he had any hope that she would see him, but because he was tortured with anxiety to know what would become of her, he went to the Boulevard Carnot. But at the *pension* they told him she was out, and next day, when he called again, he received the same response. He would have written, but her resolute hostility abashed him, and, after all, he had no excuses to offer. In spite of himself, his pride was touched and he determined to make no further advances.

But three days after, he was ringing up the boarding-house to ask for her. This time he was informed that she had gone away and left no address. She might have merely moved to cheaper lodgings, he reflected: on the other hand, she might have returned to Paris. From the sale of his effects he had the price of the railway fare to Paris. But to hope to trace her there was futile. He sought to console himself with the reflection that Cannes was nothing but a large village, and that if she had not gone away, sooner or later he was bound to run across her.

In the mean time, he thought with some bitterness, she who had but so lately come back into his life seemed to have passed out of it again for good and all. Now that he had lost her, he knew that he loved her. No spontaneous action of his own, but only his fall in the estimation of this girl, whose face was for ever before his eyes, had prompted his resolve to regain his self-respect. The night pulsated with love, this love that was not for him, and he fled from it.

The din dropped away behind him as, clambering up the shallow steps, he came to the head of the lane. He had left the Song of Magali below; but now from above, other and less dulcet strains rang out across the night. From the steep staircase which, turning at right angles, formed the last stage of the ascent to the top of the hill, an inebriated voice, chanting lustily, floated down. The words were English, a matter of no great surprise to Oliver Royce, who knew that in the season Cannes swarmed with British and American yacht-hands, and that many of them frequented the taverns of Le Suquet. The bend of the stair hid the singer from view, but it was obvious that he was an Irishman, and, moreover, that he was carrying a comfortable load of liquor. With a sort of rapture that revealed itself in a blissful dwelling upon every note of the ditty, tricking it out with sundry trills and quavers, and superbly indifferent to any fixed idea on the subject of key, he was roaring at the top of his voice:

'There's a place called Castle Garden,
'Tis full o' smells an' reeks,
An' iv'ry toime the staymer calls,
She dhrops a load uv Greeks,
Och [*prolongato*] *the dhur-rty, dhur-rty Greeks!'*

Oliver Royce's smile was rather wistful. Here, at least, he told himself, was a happy man: this cheerful inebriate had hit upon one way to oblivion. But then, suddenly, even as the unseen singer was attacking a second verse, the discordant voice broke upon a bellow of rage.

'Hellup! Stop thief!' a tremendous shout went trumpeting forth across the night, and at the same moment a light, hasty footfall pattered upon the brickwork of the stairs and a youth came loping down. He wore a cap crammed over his eyes, a jersey, rope-soled sandals, and, as he came under the rays of the lamp illuminating the foot of the steps, Royce saw that he carried in his hand a bulging wallet.

With a swift movement the Englishman barred the way. 'Where are you going in such a hurry?' he demanded in French.

The youth cast a swift glance behind him, then, with a gross oath, his hand flashed to his belt and a blade glinted in the lamplight. Oliver's fist shot out, but even as his assailant toppled over to a ringing punch on the jaw, a solid mass came hurtling down the stair and flattened out the pair of them. Oliver heard the knife tinkle on the stones, heard the thief grunt as the breath went out of him, and then found himself tangled up with a large man who was making ineffectual efforts to rise, at the same time bawling, at exact intervals, like a foghorn: 'Au secours! Au secours!' The youth in the jersey had disappeared.

'Stop that noise!' exclaimed Oliver as soon as he could speak. 'D'you want to get our throats cut?' He scrambled to his feet. The large man was in a sitting posture propped up against the wall. He desisted from his clamour, shaking his head dismally.

'Fifteen hundred francs gone to glory!' he ejaculated;

'the dhur-rty little dip! If the feet hadn't slid from under me at the... at the curtical moment, Oi'd uv given that one a taste uv me boot. But the ligs wint back on me, d'ye see, bhoy, be rayson uv the can, the bee-utiful, bee-utiful can, that's on me at this same moment.' He smiled beatifically. But then a frown furrowed his brow, bared by the yachting-cap set askew on the grizzled head.

'Dhrink,' he vociferated in a ponderous bellow as though he were addressing a monster gathering, 'dhrink, the curse uv the home! The man who is the slave uv the demon rum is no betther than the dumb baste uv th'...'

But now Oliver intervened. Stooping down, he linked his arm in the arm of the man on the ground and by sheer force lugged him to his feet.

'Do you say this fellow robbed you?' he demanded.

'He did that,' the large man lamented. 'Glory be to God, he has me murthered. Me wages and the month's money for the Dart. Fifteen hundhred francs! Och, wirra, what'll Oi do at all?' His mental stress imparted an even stronger rocking motion to the already perceptible oscillation of his large frame.

With an exclamation Oliver bent down and picked up the wallet. Its owner had been lying on it, where the thief had dropped it in the collision. 'Here's your pocket-book,' said the young man, glancing through its contents. 'And the money's intact. I think I'd better take charge of it until we're out of this...'

Desperately, the other clutched his arm. 'Bhoy,' he remarked with solemn plaintiveness, 'ye wouldn't abandon a man in his throuble? Ye'll see me home to the Dart? Whisht ye now an' watch can Oi walk sthraight...' Raising his feet high and planting them down deliberately, like a retriever pointing, he began to go forward. Oliver followed behind: the adventure was beginning to amuse him.

'She's a yacht, I suppose, and you're the caretaker, is that it?' he demanded.

'And amn't I the best-known man on the whole uv the Cannes wather-front?' his companion replied loftily. 'There's thim that knows Dan Halloran, uv the Dart, as has niver heard uv Mossoo Capron, the Mayor.' He staggered and, steadying himself on Oliver's shoulder, affectionately linked his arm in his. 'Thim as knows Ould Dan,' he confided, 'niver wants a friend. Dan Halloran, the best-known man on the whole uv the Port.' And, raising up his voice thunderously, he began to chant stentoriously in a rich and fruity brogue:

'Oi'm the foinest mimber uv a foightin' fource,
Th' Ri-al Constabularee,
An' th' gur-rls all so-igh
As Oi pass bo-y
"Are ye there, Mori-oi-artee?"'

Thus arm in arm, amid much linkèd sweetness long-drawn-out, they descended the hill together.

CHAPTER XX

HARVEY NOLAN

Oliver Royce and his new acquaintance were seated on either side of the fire in the snug galley of the Dart. Here, at the extremity of the basin where the little yacht was moored, the Casino with its lights and clamour seemed very far away. Side by side the yachts were tethered, each with a little gangway from stern to shore, rocking gently to the swell. From time to time the flash of the mole light, now white, now red, peeped down the companion. The lapping of the water sounded soothingly in Oliver Royce's ears.

The walk through the night air had sobered his charge. At the Dart's gangway Oliver would have taken leave of the big Irishman. But Mr. O'Halloran, clinging to his escort, declined to be parted from him. 'Let you an' me go aboard,' he suggested cajolingly, 'the way I'd dhrum up fer th' pair uv us!' Because he was aching with loneliness — it occurred to him as he followed Dan O'Halloran up the gangplank that he had not exchanged a word in his own language with any one for a fortnight — Oliver accepted the invitation, though he had not the haziest notion what the operation of 'drumming up' might signify.

It proved to be nothing more enigmatic than the brewing of a dish of tea, black and very hot and sweetened abundantly with condensed milk, in a dixie over the galley fire, to which, in due course, his host obligingly added a sizzling plate of bacon. On no account, that gentleman announced as he bent over the hissing fryingpan, should his guest return to the heights of the Suquet that night. The Dart's owner — from the fact that the caretaker alluded to his employer simply as 'herself,' Oliver inferred it was a woman — had gone to Paris for a week and the caretaker was alone on board. The hospitality of the ship was Oliver's, he gave his guest to understand, pointing at one of the two bunks the galley contained, 'an' ne'er a wurrud said!' Oliver, thinking of the long walk home to his lonely sky-parlour under the stars, yielded to the placid and homelike atmosphere of the little kitchen and agreed to stay. After all, he had no ties and no plans; in fact, no fixed point on his horizon other than the immutable fact that on the morrow he had to pay one hundred francs for a week's rent of his room, and the whole of his available capital amounted to no more than eighty.

Because he had the overwhelming desire to unburden himself to some one, to fend the interminable silences of his abundant leisure hours which had taken the place of the glittering turmoil of his former life, he found himself unconsciously making a confidant of his host. He said nothing about the episode with Mousie Hersent, but he confessed that he had lost his money at the tables and was looking for a job.

Dan O'Halloran grunted and removed his pipe to spit into the fire. 'Job, is ut?' he growled. 'An' what sort uv a job is ut you'd be houldin' down, me foine young cockerel?'

'I don't care what I do,' said Oliver. 'I know French well, I can write a bit and I can drive a car. I ought to be able to get something, it seems to me.'

His host grunted again. 'Fer thim as is in their roight moind, whoite and twinty-wan,' he enunciated sententiously, 'th' Riveerya's no place at all, at all. Th' Cotey d'Azhure's other name is dough an' begor', there's no place here fer thim as hasn't got ut. Th' bunch o' wops as runs ut is not aimin' to cut up their graft with anny as is outside th' game, 'specially not th' English an' Americans: — their job is to pay an' look plisant.'

He paused and meditatively swished his tea round in his large enamel mug. 'Listen, son. Whin th' owner uv this ould thub wint an' died on me here in Cannes — a grand gintleman, he wuz, a Misther Hill Parke, from Pittsburgh, if so be ut ye'd know th' name? — I'd uv beat it back to Clancy Sthreet, Nooyork, where I belong, if I'd uv had to crawl home on me hands an' knees, rather thin go flutherin' round afther wurruk in this dump. But my owner's sisther, d'ye see, she tuk th' Dart on, an' Ould Dan wint with th' ship. Th' lady lives in her, ye understhand, whin she comes to Cannes fer th' sayson. But if she sould th' yacht on me (which she will not, for nobody would buy an ould thub as'd sink the first toime she put to sea by rayson uv her seams bein' woide open with th' sun, God save us!) an' I lost me job, Ould Nick himsilf wouldn't kape me here. In th' four years I've bin caretaker in th' Dart, there's fellers I've seen shootin' their cuffs round th' town wan sayson, an' the nixt cadgin' th' proice uv a meal off uv th' janes at th' Casino beyant...'

'I'm not cadging from anybody,' Oliver put in rather stiffly. 'I want to work, to earn my own living.'

'Sure, that's what they all say... at first. But th' sun gits thim in th' end. Loife here is too asy, bhoy! Tahiti's not th' only place where fellers finish on th' beach. I waz a gob wanst with th' American Fleet in th' Pacific, an' I know. Take my tip, son: if you're broke, beat it quick out o' here, or, before you know it, you'll be a plain bum.'

'I can't do that,' said Oliver, wrinkling his brow. 'At least, not just for the moment.'

The caretaker affected to be busy tapping out his pipe into the fire.

'If it wuz money...' he mumbled. 'Fiftheen hundhred francs there wuz in that pocket-buk uv moine you got back. Tin per cint to th' finder is th' law. If so be ut, a hundhred an' fifthy francs...'

'It isn't only the money,' Oliver rejoined quickly, 'though it's devilish decent of you to think of it. There are other reasons why I don't want to leave Cannes at present.'

O'Halloran turned round and faced him. 'A skirt, mebbe?' Then, seeing that the young man remained silent, he added: 'Well, 'tis no affair uv moine. Tell me now, are ye honest about takin' a job?'

'Absolutely,' said Oliver.

'Ye don't moind what ye do?'

'I don't want to sponge on any one, I told you. Apart from that...'

'Can you mix a cocktail?'

The boy laughed. 'Yes, if that's a qualification...'

'An' look afther a gintleman's clothes?'

'I've looked after my own long enough...'

'An' lay a table with all thim little glasses an' knoives an' forruks an' all, an' wait on th' quality at dinner?'

'I think so. At any rate, it shouldn't be hard to learn. Are you offering me a job as butler?'

'As steward. But you're loikely too proud to take ut, is that ut?'

Oliver laughed again. 'Only try me. I'll do anything, I tell you.'

Dan O'Halloran chuckled. 'Good bhoy! That's the sperrit! Listen! Did ye iver hear tell uv Harvey Nolan?'

'That American who's got a yacht in the harbour, the Alba, isn't it? Is the job with him? He's rolling in money, isn't he?'

'Sure! He's a millionaire. He fired his steward three weeks back, an' he's lookin' fer another. It's good money fer Cannes: a thousand francs a month an' all found. Th' Alba's berthed three from this: if ye're on, step round there in the marnin' an' say that Ould Dan sint yez.'

'You bet I'm on,' Oliver told him, 'and I'm tremendously obliged to you for the tip.'

He spoke heartily enough. But deep down in his heart he was aware of a sudden feeling of reluctance to earn his bread as a menial. He made an instant effort to combat his sense of revulsion, telling himself that it was honest work and that he meant to show this girl that he was not — he couldn't forget what she had called him — a 'common gigolo.'

Long after he had retired beneath his blankets, while his host was pottering about on the deck above, putting things to rights for the night, Oliver lay listening to the slap of the water against the ship's side close to his head and thinking of Jack. Was she thinking of him? he wondered. She had told him she had once cared. Could love come and go like that?

O'Halloran's deep, rumbling voice broke in upon his meditations. 'Nolan's a good skate,' he remarked as he stooped to extinguish the hanging lamp. 'But don't forget he's an American. So leave your British high hat home, son, whin you go ask him fer th' job.' With which sage counsel he blew out the light.

The whole harbour seemed saturated with warmth and light when next morning Oliver Royce called upon Mr. Harvey Nolan. He had the impression that the brilliant sunshine, the balmy, scented air, blowing softly from the flower fields of Grasse in the hills behind the town, the peerless azure of sea and sky, were the only appropriate setting for the spotless decks, snowy reefed canvas, and gleaming brasswork of the S.Y. Alba. The magnificence of the vessel overawed the young man: the motor-launch swinging from davits; the wireless room; the glimpses of softly carpeted flats with lines of white cabin doors; the crew in their white jerseys embroidered with the yacht's name. An impressive hush rested over everything. Orders were given in undertones and the rubber-shod feet were noiseless on the shining decks.

The seaman to whom Oliver stated his business took his name aft. He presently returned and escorted the visitor to a secluded portion of the deck under the shadow of the bridge, a cool, dim lounge under green awnings. Here, in a long chair, a youngish man in a black silk dressing-gown was stretched out at full length. A cigar was in his mouth, a glass at his elbow and the Paris 'Herald' on his knee.

Oliver knew Harvey Nolan well enough by sight, wiry and hirsute, very fit-looking and bronzed, with a small, dark moustache, dark hair greying at the temples, and a brace of humorous, but somewhat languid eyes. With these he now treated his visitor to a cool and all-embracing stare.

'You're Royce, eh?' he said at last — his voice was deep and pleasant. Without waiting for Oliver to speak, he went on: 'Dan sent word about you. You want to valet me, do you?'

'Yes,' said Oliver boldly. And added, as an afterthought, '... sir.'

'Money all right? Dan told you, I suppose?' The dark eyes scrutinized his face.

'Yes, sir.'

'What about references?'

Oliver's face fell. He hadn't thought of references. 'The people at Barclay's Bank know me,' he answered, rather lamely. 'And I believe the manager of the Hôtel de Paris at Monte Carlo would speak for me, too.'

'What was your last place?'

The boy rubbed his hands together nervously. 'I'd better be frank with you, Mr. Nolan. I've never tried my hand at valeting before.'

The man in the chair laughed. 'You're like the fellow who was asked if he played the piano.' He thrust out his foot from under the folds of his dressing-gown. 'Do you think you could clean brown shoes better than that?'

By way of rejoinder Oliver extended his own foot shod in a black shoe immaculately polished half an hour before with cream and brushes borrowed from O'Halloran.

'Good enough,' said Mr. Nolan. 'You're an Englishman, aren't you?'

'Yes,' Oliver replied. And wondered why he had to strive to keep an aggressive note out of his voice.

'Where were you at school?'

'Does it matter where a valet was at school?'

Harvey Nolan raised his eyebrows, then laughed good-naturedly. 'You've put me in my place,' he replied with mock gravity. 'Quite right. I beg your pardon.' He drew on his cigar with a considering air. 'I believe I'm going to like you, Royce. Now, listen, you'll hate being a valet. Especially my valet. I've got a foul temper, do you understand? — particularly when I'm soused. Putting me to bed when I'm soused is part of your job, d'you get that?'

'Yes, Mr. Nolan.'

'Hold on a minute now.' He clasped his hands before him reflectively. 'What did I want to ask you? You don't use perfume, I hope?'

Oliver shook his head gravely. 'No.'

'Do you smoke?'

'I do. But I dare say I could give it up.'

'You needn't do that. But don't let me catch you smoking my cigars, do you hear? They set me back a dollar apiece in Havana, and I'm short. Understand?'

'I don't smoke cigars,' said Oliver shortly.

'Good,' was the imperturbable rejoinder. The man in the chair extended a languid hand towards a portfolio on the table and extracted two thousand-franc notes. These he handed to Oliver. 'Settle up your affairs on shore,' he said, 'and come aboard this afternoon.'

Oliver stared at the money. 'Am I to understand that I'm engaged?' he demanded.

'Sure...'

'But what's this money for?'

Mr. Harvey Nolan stretched himself and yawned extravagantly. 'We'll call it two months' wages on account. You wouldn't be taking on the job if you weren't hard up, would you?'

'It's terribly considerate of you...' Oliver began. But his employer cut him short.

'Go below now,' he said, 'and shout "Pierre." When you see, as with luck and persistence you may, the idlest and dirtiest-looking man on this boat, tell him to give you my shaving things, then come up and shave me.' He gave him a humorous look. 'Do you think you can shave me?'

'With a safety razor, yes,' was the firm reply.

'I hope you're right for your own sake,' was Mr. Nolan's comment. 'If you cut my throat, the job's off. And you can send Pierre up to me. When you've heard me fire your predecessor, you'll know what you're in for...'

In such wise Oliver Royce embarked on the first stage of his redemption.

CHAPTER XXI

THE GLIMPSES OF THE MOON

THE evening of a wet day was descending, russet-edged, upon Paris. The rain had ceased, leaving a thin curtain of mist drooped over the Tuileries Gardens. But in the rue de Rivoli the lights rode triumphant above the haze. The distant rear guard of the solid phalanx of traffic, creeping, amid a vast braying of horns, towards the Place de la Concorde and its myriad points of brightness, was swallowed up in the blurred vista of the endless street while yet the double row of lamps, in a rising curve, blazed a trail of lights above the all-pervading greyness.

Mademoiselle Jacqueline Morrisot, emerging from the diminutive rue de Mondovi, halted at the corner of the rue de Rivoli to look back upon that twin necklace of lamps.

She had been a month in Paris with the Ribeiras and the happiest time of her life was drawing to its close. On the following evening they were to return to Cannes. Ribeira had proved himself an extraordinarily competent guide. She was amazed at his intimate knowledge of Paris. Her experience as hostess to Victor's foreign buyers had given her an extensive acquaintance with the Parisian resorts patronized by foreigners. But Ribeira introduced them, Doña Isabella and her, into a *milieu* which was wholly French, or at most frequented only by foreigners of discrimination. He took them to obscure restaurants kept by retired chefs who delighted to demonstrate to appreciative clients that cooking in France ranks as one of the fine arts, to tiny theatres and cabarets, little bandboxes of places, where a foreigner is as rare as a Frenchman at the Folies Bergère, and where in the loges the *haut-monde* and the *demi-monde* display the Frenchwoman's sure sense of clothes. At all these places Ribeira knew the right dish to order, the right day to go, even the right hour to arrive. Yet he and his sister seemed to have no friends in Paris; but, in his bluff way, he told Jack he was a Parisian by adoption; all his life his business interests in the Argentine had necessitated regular visits to France. But when Jack chaffed him and declared that, so perfect was his French, she would have taken him for a Frenchman if she had not known he was an Argentine, he grew quite short with her and announced that the Argentine was good enough for him.

They treated her as though she were their younger sister rather than a paid employee. The three of them were on terms of Christian names almost from the outset, and Jack called Ribeira 'Neque,' which was Doña Isabella's pet name for him. They stopped at a small but very exclusive hotel on the left bank, mainly patronized by the best class of the French, and, as in Cannes, Jack had her bedroom, with its own bathroom, as part of their private suite.

She helped Doña Isabella with her clothes. They went to dress shows together to pick up ideas, and then Jack took Isabella to some of the copyists she knew, who, under her expert eye, produced marvels at a strictly economical figure. Jack profited by the occasion to smarten up her own wardrobe, with the difference that it was she who cut out and confectioned her own frocks. Ribeira surprised her one day busy at the sewing-machine, she had borrowed from the hotel. A day or two later, when Doña Isabella was having a fitting at one of Jack's copyists, she told the girl she was to choose herself an evening gown at Ribeira's expense. Jack thrilled at the thought of that frock. It did not cost Ribeira a great deal; but if Patou or Molyneux or Victor did not make it, any one of them might have.

From the start Jack divined whom she had to thank for the generosity with which she was treated. She speedily confirmed her first impression that Doña Isabella had no initiative of her own, but allowed Ribeira to boss her in everything. Doña Isabella was neither querulous nor exacting. She maintained an absolute level of nullity, towards Jack as towards everything else.

If the girl wondered, as she sometimes did, whether any ulterior motive lay behind Ribeira's attitude towards her, the half-paternal, half-comradely tone he always adopted disarmed her suspicions. She had accepted the engagement with her eyes open and, worldly-wise as she was, would not have been surprised, sooner or later, to find her employer troublesome. Ribeira was a complex character. His high spirits alternated with fits of depression. He had a rough way with him often, and Jack had seen that Doña Isabella could come in for the raw edge of his tongue. When not in company he was inclined to be morose, prone to long silences during which, when they were alone together, Jack was conscious of his questioning gaze on her face, as though he were summing her up. But at twenty-one youth does not look its gift-horses in the mouth. It vaults into the saddle and rides off gaily into the golden sunrise.

So with Jack. Enough for her that she was young, that she had the most exciting new clothes, that she was seeing this Paris, the rather grim foster-mother of her childhood, under conditions that invested it with fresh and unsuspected delights. Once having turned her back on Chez Morrisot's and Delly's, it had never occurred to her to go back to them on a sentimental pilgrimage — especially not to the bar with its terrible associations. The lure of romance lies in contrast, and the change in her fortunes on first going to Victor's had not been sufficiently marked to give her the taste for such excursions.

But now she was tempted to discover what it felt like to join the hurrying crowds of the rue de Rivoli, to battle her way up the clanging rue Saint-Lazare, on a dank March evening, knowing that she had a cosy room to return to.

And so, on the eve of their return to Cannes, she begged an hour off to go and revisit the glimpses of the moon. Delly's, she knew, had disappeared, for Madame Delly was dead. But all the same she went to the familiar corner just to recapture the old thrill of seeing the unending loops of lights of the rue de Rivoli mounting like a fairy ladder into the haze. Then, sauntering slowly, she set off to follow her erstwhile homeward trail, up the rue Royale, past the huge, dark mass of the Madeleine, and along the rue Tronchet into the great noisy *place* before the Saint-Lazare Station.

It was the green hour, as the Parisians call it, and it was the hour when Jack loved her Paris best. As in the war men stood to arms in the lull before dawn, so now the Paris that turns night into day was lining up for action. For the toilers thronging the pavements or bunched at the crossings to await the hooded policeman's whistle, pouring in streams from offices and shops into the flowing river of the street, the day was done. But with the fall of night, in the life of this city that never sleeps, another day begins. The theatre façades springing into light; the whirling electric signs; a glimpse through the windows of the big restaurants of maîtres d'hôtel and aides snatching a hasty meal before the arrival of the first diners — such were the familiar signs by which this child of the Paris streets discerned the pointing of the false dawn. The glare of Paris was in the night sky, adventure was in the air. All about her the voice of the city, mounting from the labyrinth of narrow, swarming streets about the great terminus, seemed to remind her that, everywhere in the vital immensity surrounding her, life was waiting to be grasped with both hands. In a happy curious mood, as she ascended the rue Saint-Lazare, she saw the sooty station wall across the way from the bar rear itself on high, knew that she had reached her goal.

But, having reached it, she scarcely recognized the place again. They had altered the very name. Now 'Tip-Top Bar' flamed scarlet in letters of glowing neon light above a white-and-gold front of an elegance to which Chez Morrisot's had never aspired. Within, ornate panels of chocolate-and-gold replaced the tiled walls she had known; the bar displayed a row of high chairs and a brass rail; and where of yore the grey, rueful face of the clown, reft of his motley, had peered out from behind the *parados* of bottles, she now perceived a smart young bartender in a white coat. From the bar her eye flitted instinctively to the tall cash-desk which occupied its old place near the door, as though it expected to light upon poor Célie, installed in all her blonde majesty, self-contained and imperturbable, her lips moving as she cast up her eternal columns of figures, her fingers drumming — 'un et trois, quatre, et huit, douze: je retiens un' — as, bursting back from school or tripping in more sedately from Delly's, Jack had seen her a thousand times. But now — it seemed like sacrilege — a pursy Jewess in mittens and a rubbed fur coat had usurped Célie's throne.

Jostled by the steady stream of passers-by, with the thunder of the traffic swelling in her ears, she stood and peeped through the bar's open doors. It was the slack hour: the place was deserted. From one of the glass panels folded back upon the street, her reflection looked out at her. But the contrast between the slim and elegant figure she saw mirrored there and the mental picture of Delly's 'petite main' in her shabby black that had gone, step for step, with her through Paris that evening, gave her no satisfaction. Morrisot was dead, Célie was dead, and the only home she had ever known had been utterly swept away. Madame Delly was dead, too, and Victor had slid away behind her. She was suddenly conscious of her aloneness in the world, and the sensation frightened her.

Angered her, too. For the sight of the bar had brought back memories of that night when, terrified and friendless, she had found a protector. That, also, was a wraith which had dissolved in thin air. She had not meant to think of him — all her nature rose up in arms to condemn her for thinking of him. She had faced life so long alone, she could go on facing it alone, especially with the future brightening as it was. The past was past: it was unwise to disturb it. She felt sorry she had come. She turned away.

In so doing she collided with a passer-by. To save herself from falling she stepped off the pavement. Instantly, there was a shout of execration, the ear-splitting blast of one of those shrill motor-horns that Paris cabmen affect, and a taxi whizzed past her nose. A firm grasp drew her into safety: the hand on her arm was smartly gloved in yellow chamois. She found herself gazing into a familiar face.

It was the Vicomte de Cabriac. He was quite the boulevardier, in a bright blue overcoat with a gardenia, his bowler hat set at an angle, his moustache nicely trimmed and curled up, his monocle in his eye.

'Zut,' he exclaimed, 'if it isn't the little Jack!'

His glance embraced her, leisurely, appraising. She smiled at him, cool, unembarrassed.

'Well,' he went on, 'and what brings you away from Cannes?'

'If it comes to that,' she retorted lightly, 'what about you?'

'My sister took it into her head to get married. Saint-Philippe du Roule, the Cardinal, and the whole of the Faubourg Saint-Germain — such a menagerie you never saw! You catch me coming away from the station: I've been lunching with friends outside Paris. Now then, à vous!'

She was minded to have some fun with De Cabriac. He was a snob, and externals impressed him. He was that not uncommon type of young Frenchman who makes unabashed love, on the hit-or-miss principle, to every presentable woman he meets. Since, on one celebrated occasion at Cannes, she had made it clear to him that she had no intention of letting him add her to the list of his conquests, he had rather sheered off, treating her, when they did meet, in a rough, bearish fashion. She suspected that he varied his method of approach according to the social status of his quarry.

'I?' she said languidly. 'Oh, Cannes bored me. Besides, I had to get some clothes...'

He looked puzzled. 'And Victor's?'

'Oh, I'm not with Victor's any longer. Didn't you know?'

His eye lit up. 'Is it possible that at last our little Jack has flung her bonnet over the mill?'

She reproduced with some exactness the affected laugh of the Comtesse de Saint-Luc, perhaps Victor's most exclusive customer.

'Mon cher, we don't wear bonnets any more, and the only mill left in France is the Moulin Rouge. No, I'm travelling with friends...'

His bewilderment entranced her. 'Where are you staying?' he asked.

She told him. He lifted his eyebrows: he was ostensibly impressed. She saw he was thinking that an hotel patronized by the French provincial nobility scarcely fitted into the background of a *vendeuse* at Victor's.

'And your friends, are they French, then?' he asked.

'They're South American ——'

'From Cannes?'

'Yes.'

'Do I know them?'

'It's Don Luis Ribeira and his sister...'

He shook his head. Then, glancing over his shoulder, he said: 'This bar looks all right. Wouldn't you like to come in and have a cocktail with me?'

His manner was deferential, *empressé*. Jack repressed an inclination to laugh. 'I have no time now,' she told him. 'My friends are waiting for me at the Ritz. Drive me there and I'll introduce you...'

They found Doña Isabella alone at a tea-table in the lounge. Ribeira had already left. Jack was diverted by the subtle change in De Cabriac's manner. He was suave, gallant, amusing, not only towards Doña Isabella, but also towards herself. He was returning to Cannes that evening, and, learning that they were going back on the following night, he declared that they must have another meeting. Would it amuse them to board a yacht, the most beautiful yacht in the harbour? It belonged to his friend, Harvey Nolan, a charming American. He turned to Jack. 'You met him once with me at the Casino, do you remember?' he said. 'He will be delighted to see you any afternoon. And your brother, too, madame,' he added, with a gesture of the hand towards Doña Isabella.

Doña Isabella smiled in her despondent way. 'It is not easy to lure my brother away from the Casino in the afternoons,' she remarked in her lisping French. 'We are returning to Cannes only because the Casino is still open. But Jack and I will be very pleased to come.'

'A la bonne heure!' exclaimed the Vicomte. 'Shall we say one afternoon next week? I'll have a word with Mr. Nolan and let you know the day. You're at the Grand Hotel, I think you said?'

Jack smiled happily to herself as she heard the appointment made. Hitherto, to a girl in her position such an invitation from De Cabriac would have meant a wild and wet cocktail party, with the servants sent ashore and the sky the limit in everything. But now the highly respectable Ribeiras were included, and Jack knew that at last she had graduated from the *petite femme* class. She had passed to the other side of the counter. She felt that the glass of her fortunes was definitely at 'Set Fair.'

CHAPTER XXII

PORTRAIT OF A MILLIONAIRE

Oliver Royce stepped noiselessly into Harvey Nolan's cabin. The plain white room, with its narrow brass bedstead and fitted wardrobes, was flooded with greenish light filtered through the silk hangings flapping at the open ports.

A sleepy voice spoke from the bed. 'What time is it?'

'Eleven o'clock, Mr. Nolan.'

'What's it like outside?'

'Another beautiful morning.'

The owner of the Alba gave vent to a sort of rasping grunt and sat up in bed, stretching himself. 'Pull those shades...'

Oliver laid down the freshly pressed suit he carried over his arm and drew back the curtains. A disc of peerless sky slid into sight in each circular opening, and to the gentle slap of the water against the yacht's sides the sunbeams danced upon the thick glass of the portholes.

Harvey Nolan glanced at the breakfast tray beside his bed, pushed the grapefruit aside, peeped under the cover of a dish that neighboured it, and sank back again upon his pillows.

'Another beautiful day!' he repeated, groaning. Then he addressed himself to his man: 'Royce,' he said, 'aren't you ever bored?'

Oliver laid out the blue serge coat, the white flannel trousers, upon the sofa. 'Not when I'm working,' he replied impassively.

'Do you realize that you're darned lucky to have something to do?' his employer remarked. '*I've* never been allowed to work. What do you know about that?'

'I thought you told me your father owned "The Sentinel." I've always imagined a fellow could have a lot of fun running a paper, especially a big New York paper like "The Sentinel." Couldn't you have taken it over when your father died?'

'You bet! But they wouldn't let me. My mother and Uncle Joseph, that is. My father and Uncle Joseph started the paper between them. When Dad died, he left his share in trust for my mother, and Uncle Joe carried on alone. He'd have taken me in, too, I guess, only my mother wouldn't have it. I was going to be much too rich to have to work, bless her heart! Uncle Joe had more sense. He took his son in, and, when Uncle Joe died, why, Cousin Maurice just naturally succeeded him. Quite right, too. That baby knows it all, while I — I don't know a damned thing. Old Maurice tells me not to worry. He says his job is to increase my share of the profits and all I've got to do is to go ahead and spend it. Pour me out a cup of coffee, will you?'

Oliver obeyed. Nolan drained the cup at a draught and set it down with a sigh.

'I was reading an article about millionaires in "Town Topics" the other day,' he remarked. 'They had me in it. They'd worked it out that every time the clock ticks I'm two cents richer. You know, Royce, a fellow can't spend all that money on himself.'

With a woeful shake of the head he dipped his hand into the box at the bedside and helped himself to a cigar. 'The only straight deal I ever got was in the war,' he observed as he nipped off the end. 'I was Private Nolan of the Seventh Regiment, and my buddy was a pant-presser from Eighth Avenue. That old war could have lasted for ever as far as I was concerned.' He stopped to indulge in another melancholy shake of the head. 'Gosh, those certainly were the days! I shall never get a thrill like that again!'

He lit his cigar at the match Oliver Royce held for him and started to look through his mail which lay on the breakfast tray. 'Are the yachts racing to-day?' he asked, looking up, a letter open in his hand.

'Yes, Mr. Nolan, the eight-metre class.'

'The Vicomte de Cabriac wants me to lunch with him at the Cercle Nautique. Have we any one for lunch to-day?'

'No, sir.'

'I can't stand that Yacht Club luncheon crowd,' Nolan observed querulously. 'Tell the chef I'll have an omelette at one on deck. Then you go across to the café and ring up M. de Cabriac at the Beau Séjour. Say I can't lunch, but I'll join him for coffee. And, for God's sake, take this junk away' — he indicated the breakfast tray with a sweeping gesture of his hand — 'and bring me a highball!'

In the two weeks that had followed upon his engagement on board the Alba, Oliver Royce had had ample opportunity for realizing the truth of his employer's prediction that he would find the job distasteful. It was not that he minded work, even such menial work as now fell to his lot. Almost for the first time since his newspaper days in Paris he was relieved of money cares. He was lodged in pleasant surroundings with duties that were not very strenuous and no need to think where the next meal was coming from.

The crew as a body were inclined to ignore him, and he divined in their attitude something of the resentment of the true-born American against the idea of domestic service. A light-hearted, rather irresponsible lot, young fellows for the most part, they evinced a decidedly supercilious air towards anything which was not American, Oliver included, and, if they spoke to him at all, called him 'Buddy,' or just 'Ol.' Oliver, perceiving that grand airs would not go down in this frank atmosphere, adapted his manner accordingly. In point of fact, he did not have a great deal to do with the crew, for he messed alone in his steward's pantry, serving himself from the cook's galley. He was on excellent terms with the chef, a voluble Parisian, who went to the market each morning to do the shopping, and never tired of exclaiming upon what he described as the thievish ways of the local inhabitants.

The real trouble was Harvey Nolan himself. When you said he was spoilt, you had said all there was to say about him. It was a perpetual wonder to Oliver how any man could get so little out of life. His yacht had not left harbour since it had arrived at the beginning of the season, and this, though Corsica glittered, snow-capped, just below the horizon, and North Africa stood up beyond, while, from across the dazzling blue water stretching away from the Croisette, Sicily, the Isles of Greece, all those peerless shores, washed by a magic sea, seemed to beckon. But, 'I'm fed up with this lousy Mediterranean,' Harvey Nolan would proclaim from his bed or his deck-chair. 'I've sailed every inch of it in my time and I know it like my old hat. If I have to be anywhere, I'd as lief stick around here where a fellow at least sees a friend's face from time to time.'

He had loved beautiful women, yet, when he spoke of these old affairs, as he sometimes did, it was with disgust. He was not apparently vicious, though Oliver surmised that he would grasp at anything that promised to shake him up out of his eternal state of ennui; neither mean in money matters, though he was businesslike enough about accounts, nor yet spendthrift. He was well-read and a highly intelligent talker when he was roused; but for the most part he was too bored, or perhaps too indolent-minded, to take a sustained interest in anything.

Whatever he had been in his earlier years, now, on the verge of forty, he just let himself drift. By himself on his yacht he was abstemious enough; but if he went to a party where there was drinking, the chances were that he would come back, as he called it, 'pie-eyed,' and Oliver had to undress him, amid torrents of the most horrible profanity, and put him to bed. He hardly ever seemed to make a plan. Now, at the end of the Cannes season, with most of his friends already gone to London, Paris, Aix, or back to New York, the Alba was still in port, her owner stretched out in a deck-chair under the awnings with a book, or gambling in a desultory sort of fashion at the depleted tables in the rooms on shore.

Oliver found that, light as his duties for the most part were, he had virtually no leisure. Day and night Nolan expected him to be at his beck and call. No matter at what hour he came back on board — from the Casino, or from a run in the Renault to Juan-les-Pins or Monte Carlo — he expected to find his man in attendance. If it was in the small hours of the morning and he felt disinclined for bed, he would make Oliver sit down with him on deck or in the saloon, give him a whiskey-and-soda and proceed to discuss all manner of subjects, from Christian

Science to pig-sticking in India, until the quays were ringing with the stir of a new day.

The fickleness of his moods was past all reckoning. When Oliver went to call him, after such a night of talk, the chances were that Nolan would suddenly revile him, accuse him of being familiar or 'putting on dog.' He was at his worst — as, indeed, he had warned the young man — when he had been drinking. At such times he seemed to take a sort of sadistic delight in trying to prod his retainer out of his rigid impassivity. He would throw his English nationality in his face, calling him a 'limey,' and asking him, with mocking voice and infuriating reiteration, if he knew what a 'limey' was. And when, the first time this happened, Oliver had to confess his ignorance, with the solemn prolixity of intoxication and with all manner of abuse, his master explained that 'limey' meant a something-or-other, blank-dashed, asterisking son-of-a-something Englishman.

Yet, with all this, the boy could not help liking Nolan. He could be charming when the fancy took him. And Oliver was grateful to him for making no attempt to pry into his past. Yet, in various small ways, he took occasion to mark the social equality between them. He did not, it is true, invite him to share a meal with him on board the yacht, and Oliver would have declined the invitation had it been forthcoming. But, as has been seen, he liked him to drink with him and, more than once, when dinner was over, he insisted on Oliver sitting down and taking a glass of port, when they chatted together without restraint, like a couple of old friends. And once, when they motored into Nice, he carried Oliver off to lunch with him at the Negresco.

Moreover, his remorse, after one of his drunken lapses, was palpably sincere. On the morning after such outbursts when, in answer to the bell, Oliver went in with the breakfast, he would feel his employer's eyes following him round as he set the cabin to rights. Then Nolan, pressing his hands to his head, would say: 'Gosh, I believe I was canned last night. Was I extra pie-eyed, Royce?' And Oliver, who had made up his mind, not without much bitterness of soul in the night watches, that his master's fits of vinous contumely must be borne with as part of an unpalatable job, would reply sturdily, 'Pretty fair, Mr. Nolan.' Whereupon the dark eyes would search his face once more, and the man in the bunk would ask repentantly, 'Was I very terrible, Royce?' And Oliver would reply as before, 'Pretty fair, Mr. Nolan.' Then the millionaire would laugh and say: 'Well, I warned you, didn't I? You mustn't take any notice of what I say when I'm stewed. You'll have to be a good chap and forget it, eh, Royce?' with a smile so irresistible and in accents so contrite that Oliver would laugh back and answer, 'All right, Mr. Nolan.'

But after one such night, when Nolan's language had been more outrageous than anything he had perpetrated in that line before, Oliver felt that the limit had been reached. The tinkle of the bell about noon from the owner's cabin seemed to quicken his sense of injury. He remained motionless, in the saloon entrance, gazing seaward, while behind him, in the pantry, the bell buzzed again and again. 'Let him ring,' he told himself. 'This time I'm through.'

Then the hirsute face of Monsieur Polydore, the chef, looked out from the bulkhead from behind him. 'Eh bien, Olivier,' he gasped, ''ave you gone mad, my little one? Don't you 'ear the patron 'ow 'e ring for 'is petit déjeuner?'

'You can tell the patron, with my compliments, to go to hell,' said Oliver curtly.

But when he turned round, he found that the chef had vanished. The owner's cabin door was open and Harvey Nolan in his pyjamas was looking out. 'Just a minute, Royce,' he said, and beckoned.

With head high the young man walked into the cabin. He was not afraid of Nolan for all his money, he told himself. He meant to give himself the satisfaction of telling the boss exactly what he thought of him and then clear out. But his master's first words disarmed him.

'Why do you send me messages through the cook?' he remarked whimsically. 'Why not come and tell me yourself?'

Oliver was silent for a moment, struggling with his feelings. The memory of this rich man's gibes and sneers which found him at such a cruel disadvantage surged up in him and he felt a lump in his throat. Before he could speak, Nolan said: 'Royce, old man, I guess I was pretty mean last night. I'm sorry I hurt your feelings. Here...' and he held out a thousand-franc note.

But when he saw the boy's face, his fingers closed upon the bill and crumpled it up in his palm. 'I guess I don't mean that, either,' he went on. The note, rolled into a ball, dropped upon the carpet. 'Honestly,' he pursued, 'I didn't know I was as bad as all that. You should have socked me one on the jaw. I've said I'm sorry, haven't I? I like you, Royce. You've got grit and I don't want to lose you. Won't you shake hands?'

Oliver shrugged his shoulders. But Harvey Nolan was smiling at him and he had to smile back. 'Oh, all right,' he said, and put out his hand.

'And next time you bust me one on the nose, do you hear?' the millionaire grinned. Then, 'I'll wear a blue suit. I've got to run out to Monte,' he said in a matter-of-fact way. They were master and man again.

But that night, when Oliver went to his cabin, a parcel lay on the bunk. It contained a toilet set in a leather roll, an expensive-looking affair in ivory and silver. The gift moved him strangely. It was the first present he had received since his mother died. Friendless as he was, he began to feel that in Harvey Nolan he had found a friend.

And he wanted a friend. He grieved for Jack terribly. A month had elapsed since their parting on that fatal Sunday and she had slipped out of his life as utterly as though she were dead.

He thought of her now as, having brought Harvey Nolan his whiskey-and-soda, he crossed the gangplank and followed the quay round to the Café des Allées. He wondered what he would do if he should meet her face to face, or, rather, what her attitude would be. As he crossed the open place under the ancient, umbrageous planes, he amused himself by pretending that this and that feminine figure which happened to catch his eye among the trees was she, coming to meet him.

His message despatched, he retraced his steps towards the yacht, his mind still busy with his diversion. Here was a girl approaching him now. She was young, even as Jack, and dressed with the sure taste that proclaimed the Parisian — how gay her yellow scarf was! But, alas, it was not Jack! This girl was dark, inclined to be massive, too, with heavy eyebrows and an olive skin. With her yellow hat and yellow foularde knotted about her creamy neck, she had the air of a gipsy.

He was about to pass her by when, to his astonishment, he was hailed by name. He turned.

The girl had halted and was smiling at him. 'It is Monsieur Royce, isn't it?' she said in French.

He raised his hat. 'Why, how do you do?' he said confusedly, his mind a blank — he was not conscious of ever having seen this dashing brunette in his life before.

She laughed softly. 'You've forgotten me...'

'Not at all,' he stammered, 'but just for the moment...'

'Don't you remember, one Sunday on the beach? I'm Dolores...'

Of course. It was Jack's friend, one of the girls from Victor's who had fetched her away to go to Saint-Raphael. His spirits shot sky-high. 'The friend of Mademoiselle Jacqueline,' he said. 'Of course, I remember you quite well. Just for a second, in that charming hat...'

She cooed delightedly. 'You like it? But of what use are pretty things now? Every one is gone from Cannes. To-morrow I return to Paris myself...'

'And how are things at Victor's?' He would not do it too obtrusively, he told himself, but he must bring the conversation back to Jack.

Mademoiselle Dolores pulled down the corners of her full lips. 'Comme çi, comme ça. We closed the Cannes branch for the season yesterday. It was time. The patron is in a massacring mood. They say he loses all the profits of his business at the tables...'

Oliver glanced aside. 'And Mademoiselle Jacqueline? She's no longer with you, is she?'

'For that, no!' The full lips curled. 'The little Jack is ambitious. She has ideas of her importance...' She broke off. 'Do you still see her?'

The boy flushed. 'I haven't seen her very lately...'

Dolores sniffed. 'Mademoiselle has no time for her old friends, it is evident. Still, when one is on the honeymoon...'

He bounded. 'Honeymoon! Do you mean to tell me that she's married?'

The girl threw back her head and laughed. 'A figure of speech, mon vieux. The Riviera sun has at last melted our ice-cold Jacqueline. She has taken a lover and is off to Paris with him.'

'I don't believe it...'

'One of the girls at our Paris shop saw them together at the Boîte à Furzy. But you would scarcely know her again, the little Jack, she says. An evening robe, an affair of five thousand francs, gold shoes — quite the grande dame. And he, so tender, so solicitous...'

He said again, 'I don't believe it.' Stubbornly.

'But Mélanie saw them, I tell you. A fat man. With a beard. And I' — she tapped herself importantly — 'I know him. He has been at Cannes. A South American. And rich? Tu parles. He plays at the big table at the Casino. And I'll tell you something else. When our virtuous Jacqueline got the sack from Victor's, she went straight to this old baboon at the Grand Hotel and stayed with him...'

She eyed him shrewdly, but his face was unrevealing. 'Who is it? Do you know his name?' he asked, staring beyond her through the trees.

'Mais si — his name is Ribeira...'

'Ribeira?' The boy shrugged his shoulders with a contemptuous laugh. 'I know him. Why shouldn't Jack go and stay with him if she wants to? He's got his sister with him...'

'Certainly. Doña Isabella is one of our customers. Our little Jack is nothing if she's not careful. A fat lot they care, the pair of them, for Doña Isabella. Why, she's terrified of her brother, if he is her brother...'

He looked at her so fixedly that she mistook his intent. 'It's dull in Cannes, pas vrai?' she remarked demurely. 'I've got the day free. Are you very busy to-day, my little Royce?' She bestowed on him an ingratiating smile.

He seemed to start. 'Me?' he said. 'Yes, I'm sorry, I've got a lot to do.' So saying, he raised his hat and strode away towards the harbour.

Mademoiselle Dolores watched him go, then looked herself over and indulged in an almost imperceptible movement of the shoulders. 'Un si joli garçon!' she murmured. On which she put up her parasol and resumed her stroll.

CHAPTER XXIII

JACK MAKES A NEW FRIEND... AND MEETS AN OLD ONE

'So THE sunset gets you like that, too, does it?'

Jacqueline stood with Harvey Nolan in the bows of the Alba and watched the sun sink behind the Esterel. They had the deck to themselves, for the others, out of deference to Doña Isabella's horror of the chill of the Riviera sundown, had gone below to the saloon for a rubber. Aft, under the awnings, there was the flash of a white coat where the steward was clearing away the empty cocktail glasses.

The glory of the sunset had burst upon them as they went forward. Arched above the purplish mountain crests, the whole western sky was daubed with colours like a palette, and suffused with a vermilion flush, as though, behind that gaudy drop-scene, the horizon were in flames. Out there, in the placid harbour, away from land, it seemed to Jack as though she and the man at her side were drawn into the spell of the dying orb. Their hands and faces and all the deck about them were bathed in fire.

She had no wish to speak. Beautiful things always reduced her to silence. And this gorgeous sunset was the culminating point of a happy afternoon.

She had been nervous about coming. De Cabriac had rung up unexpectedly that afternoon, three days after their return from Paris. Ribeira had gone off to the Casino as usual and Jack knew that she could not rely upon Doña Isabella, who easily became tongue-tied among strangers, for moral support. She had not known that they were going to a party, and the aroma of cigars, the murmur of voices, and a woman's rather strident laugh which came to them over the still air as De Cabriac led them on board, had rattled her badly.

Scarcely conscious of her surroundings, either of the two seamen in smart white jerseys who helped them across the gangplank or of the steward in immaculate drill who went forward to announce them, she fell in behind their escort and Doña Isabella. A woman and three men in a fragrant haze of tobacco-smoke made up the circle under the awnings. The woman Jack knew. It was Lady Katharine Harkett, a smart, rather steely Englishwoman, whom Jack had seen at Victor's. She appeared to recognize Jack at once; at all events, she said, 'Hullo there!' in the most matter-of-fact tone imaginable, as though they were old friends. Then Jack found herself looking into Harvey Nolan's dark, rather quizzing eyes.

When De Cabriac had fetched them, his first glance had been for her frock. In that respect she had no fear. She knew it was well ahead of anything she was likely to encounter at Cannes. The discreet, mustering glances to which Lady Katharine, big and bony in a skimpy last year's foularde, was treating her, were her corroboration.

But, unlike the Frenchman, Harvey Nolan's keen regard had gone straight to her face. It held a sort of latent suspicion that puzzled her. She had the fleeting impression that, like so many rich men, he was wary of unattached females. His air, a trifle imperious, yet withal democratic and debonair, rather blasé, yet with a species of vibrant, unsapped virility behind it, appealed to her as something new in her experience of men. She was conscious that he took externals for granted: his gaze seemed to go past the pretty clothes into the mind of the woman beneath. The discovery interested and at the same time flattered her. This man, more than any man she had ever met, gave her the impression of understanding women.

He proved it by promptly taking Doña Isabella off her hands. Jack he confided to one of the men, a plump, middle-aged Englishman with a peeled nose under a battered yachting-cap, whom he introduced as Sir George Lasseter, at the same time bidding the other member of the group, a freckled American youth addressed simply as 'Harry,' to get her a drink. Himself he devoted, in quite passable French, to setting Doña Isabella, glazed with shyness, at her ease. Yet Jack was conscious that his eye was on her. Every time there was any sign of her dropping out of the desultory conversation round the cocktail table, he was quick, with a deft remark, to bring her back into it.

Without quite knowing how he did it, she realized that it was he who contrived, the American boy having taken his departure, that the others, having their four, should play bridge. His proposal that he should show her over the yacht was made with a deprecatory, almost a humble air. Though it was quite obvious that he had engineered this tête-à-tête, she liked the diplomacy with which it was achieved. When Doña Isabella exclaimed upon the perils of the Riviera sundown, and their host brought Jack an overcoat of his to throw about her shoulders, a fleecy, shaggy, mannish thing reeking of peat, the girl nestled into its softness, feeling that it established a sort of intimacy between them.

He laughed in a boyish, shamefaced way. 'My friends rag me because I stay loafing at Cannes when everybody else is going north. It's the sun that holds me, I guess. Most afternoons I lie here watching it go to bed back of the mountains. It never fails to give me a thrill, though in a melancholy sort of way like that bird in Shakespeare — Richard the Second, wasn't it? — who got a kick out of talking about tombs and epitaphs. I feel like an ancient Egyptian watching the god Ra setting off on his twelve-hour hike through the underworld. Ever been to Egypt?'

She shook her head dreamily. She was watching a stack of fleecy little clouds, plumed with green and gold, piled up in the western sky.

'You're a beauty worshipper, too, aren't you?'

She coloured a little. 'Yes, I suppose I am.'

'I thought as much... Life has never given me what I wanted. That's your trouble, too. Am I right?'

She turned her candid regard upon him. 'You read people rather well, don't you?'

He laughed. 'If so, it's because I've never had anything better to do, I guess...'

'So you think I look like a disappointed person?'

'No-o —' He considered her through his dark lashes. 'But there's an expression in your face — well, kind of hungry.'

'It has no business to be there. I've been pretty lucky, really. Especially lately...'

'What do you call lucky?'

'I've always fallen on my feet...'

He laughed rather drily. 'Meaning your new job, I take it?'

'Meaning everything. Do you realize that, ever since I was little more than a child, I've had my own way to make in the world? And,' she went on boldly, fixing him with her serene brown eye, 'I should like to know what you were thinking when I came on board this afternoon, too.'

He shook his head, laughing. 'You want to know a lot, don't you?'

'You thought I was Ribeira's chère amie, didn't you? You still think so, probably. Answer me truly!'

Leaning on the rail, half-turned towards him, she waited for his response. He hesitated. 'Cab. seemed to think...'

'Never mind what Cab. said. What do *you* think?'

He contemplated her quizzingly. 'Well, aren't you?'

She breathed a resigned sigh. 'I wonder why men always put the worst interpretations on everything...'

He had taken out his cigar-case and was choosing a cigar. 'Well,' he observed slowly, 'Ribeira's an Argentine. The Latins don't take a very disinterested view about women, as a race. Particularly not about any one as attractive as you.'

'Can't a Latin be kind-hearted?'

He broke the butt of his cigar in his strong fingers.

'Is that all there is to it, Jack?'

It was the first time he had called her by her name. It eased the tension between them.

'Yes,' she answered, looking him straight in the face.

He laid his hand over hers as it rested on the rail and pressed it once gently. 'That's good enough for me...'

'I wondered myself at first,' she said, with a confiding air. 'You see, Doña Isabella doesn't really need a companion. All she cares to do is to lie around with a book all day. And when they go to New York, I'm certain they could find some one to take her out shopping and talk

English for her for very much less than they pay me — I mean if you think of the fare to America on top of my salary. That's why I say that Ribeira's kind-hearted. There was no real reason why he should have engaged me. He just happened to be present at a very unpleasant scene I had with a customer...'

Harvey Nolan chuckled audibly.

'You've heard about it?'

'Lady Katharine told me...'

'What did she tell you?'

'Only that you'd run up against the Hersent woman and lost your job. No details.' He chuckled again. 'Oh, boy, I'd like to have heard you pan that old trout!'

A silence fell between them. The lemon dusk was dropping swiftly down and lights were beginning to wink along the heights above the town. Presently Nolan said: 'Just how much do you know about this bird, Jack?'

'Not very much,' she admitted, 'but he's always kind and considerate: that's enough, I think. And he has never tried to make love to me...'

'Yes, but how does he live?'

'He used to be in business in the Argentine. Now he's retired. I suppose he made his fortune over there.'

Nolan shook the ash from his cigar over the side. 'I wonder...'

'Do you suggest that he's an adventurer?'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'The Riviera's full of folk who live like fighting cocks with no visible means of subsistence.'

At that moment there was a light footstep on the deck, the gleam of a white coat in the gathering gloom. A voice said: 'Excuse me, Mr. Nolan, how many shall you be for dinner?'

At the sound of the voice, Jack glanced swiftly round. As her eye fell upon the intruder, she realized that, for the first time in the excitement of the afternoon's events, she was taking note of Harvey Nolan's steward. But Oliver Royce, impassive and deferential, his crisp fair hair gleaming in the light of the quayside arcs, gave no sign of recognition.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SUMMONS

INWARDLY, however, the young man was raging. Jack's arrival on board had taken him completely by surprise: guests at the cocktail hour on the Alba were rarely announced in advance. Just for the moment, as she passed him at the gangplank, he had not known her, so flawlessly *chic* was she in her flimsy grass-green gown and little hat to match. But then he had seen Doña Isabella. He did not have to look again to identify the radiant, brilliant apparition who accompanied her.

He conducted them forward, biding his time. Presently, when he was serving the drinks, he told himself, she would recognize him. But he was to discover, to his mortification, that all her attention was given to Harvey Nolan. Though she chatted with the others, she had no eyes for any one else. As he saw his employer gradually and dexterously monopolize her, such an impulse of embittered jealousy swelled up in his heart, as he stood behind the cocktail table, that he had to repress an insane desire to fling the shaker at Harvey Nolan's head.

He felt as though a gulf had opened between him and this tranquil and blasé group gossiping and sipping drinks under the awnings. None had a glance for him, not even De Cabriac. He knew De Cabriac for an arrant snob. Jack's behaviour apart, he might have believed that the Frenchman was deliberately ignoring him. But Jack so plainly did not see him. For her and, indeed, for the rest of them, the steward simply did not exist. This girl, with her beautiful clothes and *soignée* air, had already left him far behind. He had met her too late. Her story was, no doubt, to be first, Ribeira, then Harvey Nolan. *Sic itur ad astra!* Damnation!

From his post, after the others had disappeared down the saloon companion, he watched her follow his employer forward. He was too distant to hear what they were saying, but the suggestion of intimacy between them as they stood side by side at the rail filled him with a sort of despairing fury. He dallied about his task of clearing the table, his eyes always upon the two backs turned towards him. The nightmare fancy gnawed at his heart that he was witnessing the inception of a love passage. With the blood pounding at his temples and hands as cold as ice, he found himself waiting for Nolan to glance cautiously round and then disappear softly with the girl behind the forward boat. So that was why De Cabriac had brought her on board! Damn the fellow, he had always toadied to the rich! He wouldn't be above a *métier* such as this!

Suddenly Jack swung about and Oliver saw her face. Her eyes shone and her colour was heightened, as though something had upset her. Nolan's voice drifted across the still evening. There was something subtly caressing about his deep, pleasant drawl. The next minute he was leaning towards her in an intimate, protecting fashion. Very deliberately, Oliver laid down his napkin and went forward.

But in the twenty paces he had to cover to reach the bows, he regained the mastery over himself. He had no right to interfere. The girl was able to look after herself, and if she wanted to hook a millionaire, who was he, a beggar and a paid dependant, to say her nay? Yet he would not turn back. Though he hated to be seen by her in his present menial occupation, he was tormented by the desire to find out whether, when they met face to face, she would still ignore him.

By the quickness with which she turned round on his interruption, he knew she had recognized his voice. There was a bewildered look on her face as, her smooth forehead barred by a little furrow of perplexity, she stared blankly at him. One hand stole to her breast in an instinctive gesture and she moved her lips as if about to speak. But he was prompt to avert his gaze.

If the girl had meant to say anything, Nolan anticipated her. 'Dinner-time already, Royce?' he remarked nonchalantly.

'It's a quarter to eight, Mr. Nolan,' Oliver answered, looking straight to his front.

Harvey Nolan turned to Jack. His arm was stretched along the rail and, as he moved, it rested against her shoulders. 'Listen,' he said, bending to the girl in his easy way, 'what d'you say to us going some place to eat? I'm sick of this old hooker. The car's on the quay there; suppose we jump into it, just the two of us, and run over to Juan or the Eden Roc and get a spot of dinner?'

Against his will Oliver's glance flickered to the girl's face. It seemed to him that her eyes rested on him for an instant before she replied. 'I'd love it,' she vouchsafed, 'but I'm afraid I can't leave Doña Isabella.'

'Ah, pshaw,' Nolan exclaimed, 'she can dine on board with the others. They're sunk in their bridge. If we skip off now, they'll never notice we've gone. We'll be back in an hour or so, long before they've finished dinner.' He turned to Royce. 'Tell Polydore, dinner for four. At nine. Earlier, if the ladies want it. And if any one asks for us, we've gone for a stroll. Get me?'

'Very good, Mr. Nolan.'

For the fraction of a second he delayed his return along the deck, waiting to see whether Jack intended to allow her objections to be thus set aside. But she only laughed and said: 'If there's a row, you'll have to get me out of it!'

'Sure, honey,' Nolan laughed back, 'you go ahead and trust your Uncle Dudley.'

But even as Oliver, with red murder in his heart, turned about, a seaman hurried up with a note. 'It's for one of the ladies from the Grand Hotel,' he explained. 'A man just brought it.'

Nolan took the letter and, after a glance at the address, handed it to Jack. 'For you,' he said.

She broke the seal. 'It's from Ribeira,' she announced; 'he wants us to go back at once. He says it's urgent.'

'Oh, rot, Jack!' Nolan vociferated. 'Tell him you'll be back at nine. That'll be plenty time enough.'

She shook her head. 'No, honestly, I must go now.'

'"Some one's always taking the joy out of life!"' he quoted despondently. 'Couldn't you go and come back? I'll run you over to the Grand in the car and wait.'

'It would save time if you took us in the car,' she rejoined. 'But I won't go out with you to-night, if you don't mind. Another evening, perhaps.'

She gave him her hand. He kept it for an instant, gazing into her eyes. 'To-morrow, then?'

She withdrew her hand and looked away. The gesture was full of coquettish grace. 'I don't know. It depends on Doña Isabella...'

'I'll square her...'

They hurried along the deck to where a lantern glowed above the saloon companion. Oliver remained standing by the rail, his fists clenched, his mouth bitter.

At the hotel Jack left Doña Isabella to wait for the lift and raced upstairs. She was intrigued by the sudden summons. Unless they went to the Casino after dinner, they seldom saw Ribeira for more than a few minutes in the evenings when he briefly appeared at the hotel to change into evening clothes before returning to the tables. For, like so many of the habitués of the rooms, he rarely dined, but contented himself with a sandwich eaten on the green cloth.

As she opened the sitting-room door, she heard his voice. He was speaking on the telephone. The first words she caught brought a perplexed frown to her face. 'Is that the Villa Célandine?' she heard him say.

Since the evening when he had brought her his offer at the *pension*, he had never mentioned Mrs. Hersent to her again. She had assumed that his relations with the Villa Célandine were definitely broken off. It impressed her disagreeably to find that he was still on terms of social intercourse with her old enemy. As she stood at the door, his voice, strident with irritability, came to her, 'I want to speak to Madame...'

A pause. Then Ribeira said: 'Gone to Paris? When?' He seemed to be intensely put out. 'In the Rolls?' he repeated. 'When do you expect her to arrive? Zut!' He slammed down the receiver. Then Doña Isabella joined Jack and they went into the sitting-room together.

Though it was after eight, Ribeira was still in his day clothes. Directly he saw them, he bounded at Doña Isabella, watch in hand, and overwhelmed her with a flood of excitable Spanish. Jack could not understand what he was saying, but it was evident that he was considerably incensed. His beard seemed to bristle and his eyes blazed. Doña Isabella looked frightened to death. Leaving her sobbing in a chair, he rounded on Jack.

'What does this mean?' he demanded, this time in French. 'You go out and leave no word where you are when I have urgent need of you. I might be hunting for you still if I hadn't met Steyn accidentally in the bar here. De Cabriac, it appears, told him he was taking you on board the Alba. Why wasn't I informed?'

Jack looked contrite. As they always disposed of their time in the afternoons, it had not occurred to her to mention De Cabriac's invitation, and Doña Isabella was hopelessly vague about their engagements.

'I'm terribly sorry,' she said. 'I suppose I didn't think of it. I must have imagined you knew.'

'Nothing of the sort,' he snapped back. 'I should never have consented to your going on board that man's yacht.'

'But surely you've got nothing against Mr. Nolan?'

'He's a rich idler and no fit company for a young girl. Besides, I strongly object to these casual acquaintances. I always wish to know with whom you and Isabella consort. Isabella's a fool, but I expected you to have more sense... Now go and pack: you'd better pack for Isabella, too, or we shall miss the train. It leaves in an hour's time...'

She stared at him. 'Do you mean to say we're leaving Cannes?'

'Yes.'

'Where are we going?'

He made an exasperated gesture. 'To Paris. You'll have to make haste. I must be in Paris to-morrow.'

He switched back into Spanish, addressing himself once more to the limp and disconsolate figure in the chair.

Jack went out across the corridor to her bedroom in a rather despondent mood. She was not sure, she mused, as she changed the pretty green frock for a wrapper, that she wanted to leave Cannes so soon. There was the mystery of Oliver Royce to be cleared up: she had had no chance to ask Harvey Nolan about him on the yacht, and in the car she had not liked to raise the topic before Doña Isabella.

She had tried to deceive herself into believing that she did not care what had become of him. But the thrill of seeing him again reminded her how often, during her month in Paris, and still more, since their return to Cannes, she had wondered about him, asking herself whether, in spite of what had happened, he had stayed on at the Villa Célandine.

Their meeting on the yacht had been so dramatically unexpected that she had not at once grasped the meaning of his presence there in a steward's white coat. She had not been able to resist the temptation of showing her independence of him by her eager acceptance of Harvey Nolan's invitation to a tête-à-tête dinner. But the moment she had done so she was sorry, for she saw the bitterness in his eyes. She had not meant to hurt him: it was only that she perceived too late how tragically unhappy he looked.

So he had left Mousie Hersent: there was some good in him after all. Her conscience pricked her gently. She herself had amends to make. That night at the Grelot, when he had paid for her dinner, he must have been almost at the end of his money. It was gallantly done. She had called him so many bitter names, and he had never reminded her of it.

She sighed and went across to Doña Isabella's bedroom. Why were they going to Paris? A wild notion flashed into her mind. Had Maître Beauval sent for them? Ribeira had told her he had interviewed the lawyer and impressed upon him the necessity for making further enquiries. Maître Beauval had kept her papers, Ribeira said. Suppose he had discovered something? She dismissed the idea. After all these years? Unthinkable!

As she moved about the apartment, the hectic jabber of Spanish drifted in from the room next door. What had upset Ribeira? He sometimes lost his temper with his sister, but he had never raised his voice to her before. She wondered what he had against Harvey Nolan. She remembered that Nolan had sneered at her friend; clearly there was no love lost between them. But Riviera society was like that: one half had no good word to say for the other half. Or had Mrs. Hersent been making trouble? She flushed at the thought. Mrs. Hersent would be in Paris: she hoped she wouldn't have to meet her.

The packing done, she left the heavy wardrobe trunk for the valet to close, and, having shut the suitcases and hat-boxes, opened Doña Isabella's smart blue leather jewel-case. Doña Isabella possessed beautiful jewellery — among other things a splendid double row of pearls, large and round and milky, which she always wore, a pair of magnificent cabochon emerald earrings, several handsome diamond bracelets, and a huge solitaire diamond ring. Doña Isabella had lately given up wearing the ring — she said she meant to get the setting altered, as it hurt her finger — and Jack, who loved its bluish fire, looked for it in the case. But it was not there, and presently she discovered that the earrings and the bracelets were missing, too. In some perplexity she picked up the jewel-case and went quickly into the sitting-room.

Ribeira had vanished. Doña Isabella sat alone, sunk in lachrymose melancholy. She made such a pathetic figure with her brown, rather simian face all wet with tears, that Jack, setting the jewel-case down on the table, ran to her side and putting her arms about her, kissed her.

'Don't fret yourself, chérie,' she said. 'He's only annoyed now because we were late. He'll be all right once we're in the train. It was my fault, really. I should have remembered to tell him where we were going.'

Doña Isabella sniffed forlornly. 'Men can be so cruel. It wasn't your fault, preciosa. He's tired of me, that's all.'

'Tired of you?' Jack's clear laugh rang through the room. 'How can a man be tired of his own sister?'

'I'm getting old,' said Doña Isabella sadly. 'A man likes to have young things about him, like you.' She clasped her hands together, rocking her body to and fro in an access of misery. 'Madre de Dios, have pity! I'm so unhappy!'

'There, there, chérie,' Jack soothed her and kissed her again. 'You mustn't take on so. Everything's going to come all right. I'm going to make you some of your maté to calm you down before we start. You run in and change your frock while the water boils: I left out your blue tailor-made for you to wear.'

While the older woman went slowly into the bedroom, Jack fetched from a side-table the spirit-lamp, the oval silver-bound gourd, and the silver calumet which figure in the preparation of the Argentine equivalent of the Briton's cup of tea. 'By the way,' she called through the door as she shook some dry maté leaves from a packet into the gourd, 'what have you done with all your jewellery? I don't see your diamond ring or your emerald earrings. And some of the bracelets have vanished, too.'

There was a pause. Then Doña Isabella replied: 'It's all right, Jack. I sold them in Paris.'

Jack was at the side-table, filling up the gourd from the water-jug which stood there. '*Sold* your beautiful things?' she repeated in astonishment, the jug poised in her hand. 'Oh, Isabella, whatever for?'

'An old woman like me has no use for trinkets,' the sad voice came back.

Jack poked her head in the door. Doña Isabella was just inside the room, arranging her hair at the dressing-table. 'Well,' the girl declared, 'I never heard of such a thing. Does Neque know?' She broke off. 'Why, chérie, what have you done with your pearls? You had them on at the party.'

The brown face reflected in the glass was as impassive as an Indian's. 'Neque thought the string seemed unsafe. He's taken them to Cartier's to be restrung.'

'But they'll never be ready in time. Why not wait until we get to Paris?'

'Neque was afraid the string might break on the way. Cartier's will send them on.' She put down the hair-brush and turned about. 'Voyons, Jack, you said you'd make me my maté.'

With a thoughtful air the girl kindled the spirit-lamp and set the gourd upon it. Then, gathering up her parasol and bag, she slowly left the sitting-room and went across the corridor to her bedroom to attend to her own packing. Her modest wardrobe trunk stood in the corridor, and she began operations by carrying out to it the green frock she had laid on the bed.

As she emerged from the room, she saw Oliver Royce advancing towards her.

CHAPTER XXV

THE MAN AT THE CAFÉ

Now that he had shed his white jacket, in his well-cut blue suit he seemed to her to be once more the Oliver she remembered. His face was set and rather white. She was no coward, and, though she was conscious that he was bristling with anger, she stood her ground and waited for him.

Straight as a ramrod he came on and, when he stood before her, dipped one hand into the pocket of his coat and produced a pair of gloves. 'You left them in Mr. Nolan's car,' he explained stiffly. His hand disappeared into an inner pocket. 'He asked me to give you this note, too.'

Clasping the green dress to her, she took the gloves and the letter. Abruptly the young man turned to go.

'Wait,' she said rather hurriedly, preparing to open the envelope, 'there may be an answer.'

'I was not told to wait,' he answered roughly. Nevertheless, he paused, half-turned from her, his face averted.

With a swift movement she deposited the frock and the gloves upon the closed trunk at her side, and looked at him during a moment of silence. She made no attempt to read the note in her hand. Her eyes were compassionate, but he did not see them. Sullen and hostile, he evaded her gaze.

'I wanted to ask you there on the yacht this afternoon,' she said, rather timidly, 'only I didn't get the chance. What are you doing on board the Alba?'

'Haven't you got a pair of eyes in your head?' he burst out savagely.

She ignored his tone. 'Are you really Mr. Nolan's servant?'

'Yes. Were you thinking of engaging me?'

'Then you've left the Villa Célandine?'

He nodded morosely.

She clasped her hands to her breast. 'Oh,' she exclaimed, 'I'm so glad!'

The grateful glance she gave him kindled no friendliness in that austere face. Still without meeting her regard, he turned towards her and said coldly: 'You'd better read your letter if you want me to take an answer back.'

'Never mind the note,' she said. 'Tell me about yourself.' And when he made no move to break his stubborn, bitter silence, she laid a hand lightly on his arm. 'Don't let us quarrel. I know you're angry with me. You've every right to be. I said hard things to you when last we met. More than I ever intended to say, Oliver...'

He laughed harshly. 'Oh, no, you didn't. You said exactly what you thought. You called me a common gigolo. Well, you ought to know!'

This time he raised his eyes and looked her squarely in the face. The resentment in his expression stressed his intent to wound. She recoiled, a fold of her lower lip caught up by one of her small, even teeth, her eyes bright — she was like a child trying not to cry.

'Oh, I know your explanation. The philanthropic Señor Ribeira comes along out of the blue and engages you as his sister's companion. The trousseau and so forth and so on' — he plucked angrily at the frock as it lay on the trunk — 'are all part of the job...'

'Wait a minute!' she broke in. 'Do you, too, believe that Ribeira is my lover?'

'Don't you specialize in rich men?' he retorted furiously. 'It doesn't matter that this Argentine gorilla is old enough to be your father: he would do while you looked about for something better...'

'Oh, you're mad!' she exclaimed.

'You're right. I *was* mad to believe in you. When all the time you're like every other pretty woman on this cursed coast.... Aren't you going to open your letter?' His tone was jeering. 'You've made a great hit with my employer, you know. And our Mr. Nolan isn't easy to please. A considerable improvement on the apelike Ribeira, isn't he? And ever so much richer...'

But, with a sudden movement, she had turned from him towards the bedroom door. He, thinking she meant to escape from him, caught her by the sleeve. 'Can you deny that he made love to you to-night? And that you led him on? Why don't you read his letter? His first love-letter, isn't it? Doesn't it give you a thrill?'

She, however, still kept her face averted. It was then he realized that she was crying. But, consumed as he was with bitterness, he paid no heed. 'Shall I read it for you?' He snatched the letter from her listless hand and ripped the envelope across.

Jack, dear [he read out, his tone savagely ironical],

You left your gloves in the car. When I found them I felt as though I was again holding your hands as I held them when we parted to-night. I loved our talk, but I have lots more to say to you. When do we meet again?

'You had no right to do that!' she exclaimed indignantly. 'Give me that letter at once!'

But he had broken off on an angry snarl. 'God!' he cried. Then flung down the letter at her feet and fled away.

He did not go back to the Alba at once. Not to be done out of his jaunt, before despatching Oliver on his errand, Harvey Nolan had gathered up Lady Katharine and De Cabriac in his car and whirled them off for dinner somewhere along the coast. Oliver felt glad he did not have to face his employer just at once. He was conscious that to bear the American ill-will was illogical, since Nolan was no wise to blame.

The evening was warm and starry and all about him the hot Provençal blood was answering its call. Under the ancient, square-cut plane trees of the Café des Allées, where he presently found himself, the lovers whispered and nestled in the shadow or remained silent, locked in an interminable embrace. Ultimately, he fled for refuge to the big café abutting on the *place*. Here he sat down at one of the outside tables. While the waiter fetched him his *cinzano à l'eau*, he glanced through a newspaper which some one had left upon the chair.

It was the Paris edition of the 'New York Herald.' With the instinct of the Riviera habitué, he turned first to the Riviera news. His eye jumped from name to name, picking out those that were familiar to him in a world of which, as he reflected with a sort of grim satisfaction, he no longer formed a component part. The Vicomte de Cabriac, he read, had returned to Cannes from Paris. The guests at Lady Hartley-Poole's cocktail party at Cap Ferrat had included Mr. Harvey Nolan. Mrs. Hersent had given a large luncheon party at the Villa Célandine, Cannes, previous to her departure for Paris, where she would, as usual, spend the spring at her picturesque river residence, Les Charmettes, at Rotival-on-the-Seine. Among those present were — a string of names 'and Miss Fitch.' Poor Fitchie, Oliver commented to himself, always came last. On the occasion of Saturday's gala at the Café de Paris, Monte Carlo, Mr. Harvey Nolan entertained a party of friends at dinner in honour of Mr. and Mrs. Winthrop Elmer, of Santa Barbara. Amongst those seen lunching at the Casino of Juan-les-Pins was that popular American sportsman, Mr. Harvey Nolan, owner of the S.Y. Alba, now in the port of Cannes...

Out of the printed page his employer's dark and mobile face seemed to rise up at him. He cast the paper from him. Always Harvey Nolan! The note he had read had filled his mind with an image of which he strove in vain to be rid. He saw Jack's slim, cool hands imprisoned in the American's strong, brown ones, and that lissom, well-knit figure drawing her gently, but, oh, so confidently, to be caught up, none too reluctantly, in those waiting arms. Morosely the boy stared out past the lights and chatter of the Allées to the port and the winking beacon of the mole. Though his gaze was turned inward and his thoughts were far away from his immediate surroundings, he presently became aware that he was under scrutiny from somewhere close by. Moving his head to the right, he perceived that a man at the adjoining table was eyeing him intently.

He was a small, very dapper individual. His dark grey flannel suit was well-cut and inconspicuous; the black pearl in his tie unmistakably valuable. His crisp, grizzled hair, coal-black eyes, and a sort of bluish tinge in his complexion clearly indicated Indian blood. In short, he was the type of well-to-do South American business man taking a Riviera holiday.

At Oliver's instinctive movement, instead of deflecting his gaze as most people in like circumstances would have done, he leaned forward, and, touching the newspaper, observed in excellent English: 'You're American, I think?' Then, seeing that Oliver, startled by the interruption, hesitated before replying, he added: 'You are employed on the yacht Alba, are you not?'

'Yes,' said the young man. 'But, as a matter of fact, I'm not an American. I'm English.'

His companion's rather wistful expression melted into a smile. 'So much the better. We have many English in my country. I am from the Argentine. Will you permit me to offer you something to drink?'

Oliver declined the drink, but took a cigarette. He was not averse to this distraction. Anything was better than being alone with his thoughts. Besides, he reflected, if he could stay out late enough and Harvey Nolan came home in decent time, he might avoid meeting his employer until morning. So he prepared to make himself agreeable to his new acquaintance, and enquired whether he was a friend of Mr. Nolan.

'No,' said the other. 'But as I was walking along the quay this evening, I thought I recognized a lady of my acquaintance back home leaving the yacht and entering a car.'

'Ah, yes,' Oliver agreed. 'That would be Doña Isabella.'

The little man was silent for a moment, fumbling for the *pince-nez* which he wore on a black riband round his neck. Adjusting his glasses on his nose, he looked intently at his vis-à-vis.

'Doña Isabella, to be sure,' he remarked. 'Let's see now, what is the family name?'

'Ribeira,' said Oliver. 'She's Argentine, you know. You probably met her out there.'

'Ribeira? So, so!' the other murmured. 'And is her husband here, too?'

Oliver laughed. 'I don't think you can know her, after all. Doña Isabella isn't married. She's with her brother.'

The Argentine outlined a gesture with his small hands. 'Rather a — na — a stout man? With a beard?'

'That's right. Do you know him?'

His companion removed his glasses and fell to polishing them on his handkerchief. 'I've met him,' he observed nonchalantly. 'Do you happen to know where they are staying?'

'Yes. At the Grand.'

'And you know this — er — this Mr. Ribeira?'

'Oh, yes...'

'So, so!'

The little man had replaced his glasses and was now mustering Oliver in a long, comprehensive stare. 'I wonder,' he said at last, 'whether you would do me a trifling service?'

The boy laughed. 'A steward hasn't much time to himself, you know. What is it you want?'

The Argentine became confidential. Edging his chair nearer he said: 'Voici. I wish to speak with this Mr. Ribeira. But there are reasons why he must not know that I am here.' He broke off to consult his wrist-watch. 'To-night,' he murmured, 'it is perhaps too late. Listen, could you, would you, take me to-morrow to the Grand Hotel and ask for this gentleman? Then you can retire and I will speak with him.' His voice grew eager. 'Would you do this for me?'

Oliver rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'I take it that our friend is not over-anxious to see you?'

The Argentine's mouth shut with a snap. His black eyes were suddenly hard, like a snake's. 'Yes,' he said softly, 'I think you may assume that.'

'If you want me to help you,' Oliver rejoined, 'you must tell me more.'

The other made a quick, decisive gesture of refusal. 'No; afterwards, perhaps.' He paused. 'I am willing to pay you for this service.' His hand fumbled inside his coat.

With a movement of the hand Oliver stayed him. He was thinking rapidly. He had not been fair to the girl. He ought, at least, to have given her the chance to explain. He realized now that at the bottom of his desperate unhappiness was his gnawing remorse — that and the fear that he had riven an unbridgable breach between them. His mission to the hotel might, with luck, give him the opportunity of seeing her again. Besides, he wanted to know more about Ribeira — anything he could find out about him from the stranger was of interest, on account of Jack. He could make time for the errand, too. Sometimes, about ten, he went into town to buy the newspapers and collect the Alba's mail from the post-office. The Grand was only a few minutes from the Grande Poste; nothing would be said if he were away half an hour or so longer than usual.

He turned to his companion. 'Where are you stopping?'

'At the Carlton.'

'Can you meet me to-morrow on the Croisette, opposite the Grand, at ten o'clock?'

'Sure. But you must let me recompense you...'

The boy shook his head. 'I don't want to be paid. You shall tell me later about this man Ribeira.'

'Agreed, if you will have it so. Till to-morrow, then, at ten?'

'Right. By the way, whom do I ask for?'

'My name is Pinedo, Esteban Pinedo. I shall be waiting on the Croisette.' Impulsively, he put out his hand. 'You will render me a real service.'

The black eyes glittered as they shook hands.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN WHICH MR. HARVEY NOLAN ASKS FOR HIS TROUSERS

When, about a quarter-past ten on the following morning, Harvey Nolan awoke and rang for his man, there was no answer to the bell. Ultimately, one of the hands appeared. He found the owner in an excessively bad temper which was not improved by the man's statement that the steward had gone ashore half an hour before to get the mail.

'I'll see him as soon as he comes back,' said Nolan with the icy black look which the Alba's company had good reason to fear. 'Tell the chef to serve my breakfast at once!'

Oliver had his summons from half a dozen jeering mouths when, half an hour later, he came up the gangplank. He found Nolan in a tussore wrap breakfasting at the table in the cabin. Oliver laid letters and newspapers silently beside his employer's plate and started to collect the various articles of attire which, after his usual custom, Nolan had dropped at random here and there on retiring to rest on the previous night. He was about to carry the suit to the dressing-room adjoining when, short and sharp, Nolan spoke.

'Wait a minute,' he said. 'Where have you been?'

'Only to get the post, Mr. Nolan.'

'Will you tell me why I pay a dozen hands to loaf around all day, and yet there's nobody to go ashore but you? What do you suppose you're on the wages list for? Will you answer me that?'

'I'm very sorry, Mr. Nolan. But you were asleep and I thought I'd be back in time...'

With an exasperated gesture the American pushed back his breakfast tray. 'You thought! Last night, too, I guess, you thought it didn't matter what time you showed up. Doggone it, the way you act, any one would think you were conferring a benefit on me by taking my money. But I'm through with your damned superior airs. You're just a loafer! Like all the rest of your class, you've never done a stroke of work in your life and expect to be paid for it. What in thunder do you mean by staying out last night?'

'You told me you were going off in the car somewhere to dine. I'd no idea you'd be back so early.'

'Is that so? And that note I gave you to deliver at the Grand? I suppose "you thought" any old time would do to bring back the answer?'

Oliver's conscience smote him. For the first time it occurred to him that Harvey Nolan had been expecting a reply to his invitation to Jack. The boy's face must have betrayed his confusion, for the American added sharply: 'Are you going to tell me you didn't deliver it?'

'I delivered it all right,' said Oliver slowly.

'Well?'

'She didn't give me any answer. And now she's gone to Paris...'

'To Paris? When did she go?'

'Last night...'

'You knew this last night and didn't tell me?'

'I heard it only this morning.'

'How? Where?'

'At the Grand Hotel.'

'Have you been to the Grand Hotel this morning?' The tone was brusque, incisive.

Oliver nodded. Then, with a helpless gesture of the hands, he went on: 'I'm sorry I kept you waiting, Mr. Nolan. But I had to go. You see, I know Jacqueline Morrisot. I met her years ago in Paris under very curious circumstances, and came across her again here in Cannes, only the other day. Last night I had the chance of finding out something about this fellow Ribeira she's taken up with. That's what took me to the Grand just now. I...'

Nolan's black eyes were fixed on him. They were smouldering, resentful, and the scowl on his features had deepened. 'Hold hard a minute,' he now broke in. 'You're speaking about a friend of mine. That Cannes gossip about the girl and Ribeira is just poppycock.'

Rather wistfully the boy shook his head. 'That's what I wanted to think, too...'

'Then you can go ahead and think it. I know something about women. That girl's on the level.'

'She's gone off with Ribeira,' said the boy sadly. 'They abandoned Doña Isabella without enough money to pay the hotel bill. She's not his sister, either: she's another man's wife.'

'Oh?' interjected the American. 'And how do you know this?'

Rather disjointedly, Oliver told him of his meeting with Esteban Pinedo at the Café des Allées. 'We went to the Grand together this morning,' he said. 'Our plan was that I should ask for Ribeira, and that when he appeared, I was to leave him and Pinedo alone together. But we ran into Doña Isabella in the garden. When she saw Pinedo, she practically fainted. We had quite a job with her. We got her up to her suite, where she told us that Ribeira and the girl gave her the slip last night and left her without a bean.'

'And you think that young Jack is in it, do you?' asked Nolan.

Oliver flushed. 'I don't know what to think,' he said mournfully. 'I've no right to blame her. She lost a good job suddenly, and Ribeira's a rich man...'

'Rich man, my foot!' was Nolan's contemptuous comment. 'Why, that guy hasn't got enough money to keep a canary in bird-seed! He owes money all over the Casino. He had the nerve to try and touch me for fifty thousand francs. But I saw him coming. I've met his type before. But where does your dago friend come into this?'

'Doña Isabella's his wife. They met Ribeira at Buenos Ayres — Pinedo's a stock-broker there. It appears that Ribeira persuaded Doña Isabella to run off with him. That was six months ago. Pinedo has been hunting for them ever since.'

Nolan smiled sardonically. 'The classic touch. The rich stock-broker's wife to keep him, and then, when the dough's all gone, out!' He furrowed his brow. 'But why Jack?'

'If he's as broke as you say, I suppose he deceived her...'

'Has Pinedo any ideas on the subject?'

'I didn't stop to question him. I was rather in the way. Besides, I had to get back. I told him I'd see him later.'

Nolan stood up abruptly. 'You left them at the Grand?'

'Yes...'

'Some clothes, quick! We'll hear what he has to say.'

Oliver hesitated. 'Do you mind if I ask you a question?'

Nolan's ill-humour had utterly vanished. His 'Shoot!' was hearty and kindly.

'Are you interested in this girl?'

There was a twinkle in the black eye as Nolan answered: 'Royce, old man, I'll let you into a secret. It's so rare that any female doesn't bore me until I could shriek with sheer exasperation, that I believe I'm in love. She's a very precious and lovely person.'

'Then you don't think that... that she and Ribeira...'

'Even if I thought that, I should still want to pull her out of that old Beaver's clutches. But I don't. That's why I think I must be in love. When you get to my time of life, son, you'll understand that love means implicit trust.'

Oliver sighed. 'I suppose you're right.' He paused. 'I don't want you to imagine that, in my heart of hearts, I ever doubted her.' He drew a letter from his pocket. 'As soon as I'd had a talk with Pinedo, I meant to go to Paris and find her. Here's a letter I wrote you, resigning this job and asking you to trust me with that money you advanced me for wages until I could repay you. But I decided not to send it: it seemed rather like funking. So I came back to tell you myself. I can't stop with you, Mr. Nolan. I'm going after Jack.'

Nolan studied him for a moment in silence. 'Are you in love with this girl?' he drawled.

The boy looked away quickly. 'What does it matter if I am?'

'Well, well, well! Does she like you?'

Oliver shook his head. 'On the contrary...' he began and broke off.

'Then you think there's a chance for me?'

'Do you have to rub it in?'

His tone was so bitter that Nolan stared at him in genuine surprise. 'See here, son,' he said at last, 'this girl doesn't care anything about money. As far as that goes, you and I start even! Anyway, we'll begin by putting the skids under old Bluebeard, shall we?'

'You mean,' Oliver demanded in a dazed fashion, 'that you're going to follow her to Paris?'

'Just as soon as we've had a word with your dago buddy. Now step on it, laddie! Where the hell are my trousers?'

CHAPTER XXVII

LIGHT ON RIBEIRA

At the Grand Hotel they were shown up to Doña Isabella's suite. The sitting-room was empty when they reached it. But presently they were joined by the Argentine, who appeared from the bedroom dabbing his eyes with his handkerchief.

Oliver introduced Nolan. Pinedo gave the American his hand absently.

'I have had the doctor to her,' he explained. 'He will send her something to make her sleep. The poor thing, she is quite worn out. As soon as she is rested, I shall take her away to Italy, right out of this country and its memories of that accursed scoundrel.'

'You're not going to call him down, then?' Nolan asked.

'Bah!' said Pinedo — 'to what good? We only want to forget him. He has despoiled my poor wife. He realized the securities she took with her on her flight and sold or pawned almost the whole of her jewellery — tiens, it was through an emerald earring of hers, pledged by him at Monte Carlo, that I traced them to the Riviera. But I make him a present of his loot. The price is as nothing compared with the joy of rescuing my dear wife from that villain's clutches!'

'You're right,' Nolan agreed. 'But what about the girl?'

Pinedo shrugged his shoulders. 'Que voulez-vous? An adventurer of that type must always have some woman in tow. Though I will say that Doña Isabella takes a more charitable view. She seems to have a real affection for the girl. She goes as far as to say that this ruffian intends to exploit the little Jack as he exploited her. She even wanted us to follow them to Paris and get the girl away from him.'

'We're going to attend to that end,' rejoined Nolan briskly. 'But what can he get out of Jack? *She* hasn't got any money or valuables, has she?' He turned to Oliver.

'No, indeed,' the boy put in. 'Why, when Ribeira first met her, she was out of a job...'

'So my wife said,' replied the Argentine placidly. 'It was this Ribeira, as you call him, who, it appears, insisted on engaging the girl. Doña Isabella had no desire for a companion: she was sick and tired of keeping up before strangers the sorry farce of pretending to be this man's sister. He insisted upon this arrangement, it seems, to avoid complications. My wife has a theory... but there, I prefer my own. The girl, I believe, is young and attractive, and, apart from everything else, a pretty woman can be very useful to a fellow who lives by his wits...'

'You think the girl's his mistress?' Nolan interjected.

Pinedo flung his hands wide. 'Don't you? My wife declares he has no sentimental interest in the girl, that his motives are much deeper, some story of a birth certificate... but for me the matter is much more simple...'

A voice behind them cried out in French: 'No, no, my friend, you must not say that!' Doña Isabella in a lace wrapper, her dark eyes haggard, appeared at the bedroom door. 'Excuse me, gentlemen, that I appear before you en déshabille,' she murmured in confusion, 'but I overheard what you were saying.' She turned to Nolan.

'You'll go and save her from this man?' she pleaded. 'But you mustn't think that she was his accomplice in his flight. He tricked her as he tricked me. I'm certain of it. Nor is he her lover. At least, not yet. She was my friend, the little Jack...'

'Ah, my dear...' Pinedo expostulated.

Doña Isabella stamped her foot. 'It is as I say! Do you think I would have allowed him to instal his mistress here, side by side with me? You don't know this man as I do. He never acts on impulse. Everything is according to plan. If he has gone off with this girl, it is because he believes she will be of use to him.'

'But how, madame?' Nolan put in.

She pressed a thin hand to the bosom of her wrapper and shook her head sadly. 'Ay de mi, I cannot say. But this I know. From the moment he met her — it was at the house of a friend — he became like a changed man. He was, as it were, in a state of exaltation. That very afternoon, as we left the Villa Célandine, he said to me: "I always believed my bad luck would turn and I was right..."'

'What exactly did he mean by that?' asked Nolan.

'That his good luck was in some way bound up with the girl, I presume. Because he went straight off from Mrs. Hersent's, found out where the girl lived, and immediately engaged her as my companion. Mrs. Hersent didn't like it at all, for she claimed that the girl had insulted her...'

'You said something about a certificate I think?'

'Yes. Jack's papers. A birth certificate and other documents. She gave them to him. You see, there was some mystery about her parentage. Her mother was murdered, a dreadful story...'

'Murdered!' Nolan exclaimed, aghast.

Oliver stayed him with his hand. 'I know...'

'Ribeira promised to make enquiries for her...'

'Oh? With what result?'

'I can't tell you. He always kept his business to himself. But he sent many cables to America about her...'

Nolan and Oliver exchanged a glance.

'To America, eh?' Nolan remarked. 'Do you happen to know to whom?'

Doña Isabella shook her head. 'But what took him to Paris was a telegram about her,' she said. 'It came yesterday evening.'

'From America?' Nolan enquired.

'No. From Paris.'

'Did you read it? What did it say?'

'He left it on the desk. It was in English, and I know English so little. But I understood that he was to come to Paris immediately and bring the girl.'

'Who signed the message, do you remember?'

'I paid no attention. There was some name — not an English name, I think — and the address of an hotel was given. The message meant nothing to me. I had no idea then that he was going to abandon me. "So many people just now leave Cannes by the train," he said, "that it would be wise for little Jack to take the trunks to the station in good time." And so he sends her off. Presently, he goes down, as he tells me, to settle the bill. But in reality he must have hurried to the station. I wait an hour, two hours, and when he does not fetch me, I ask at the office and I find he has told them I am staying on.' The tears gushed from her eyes. 'Ah, le misérable!' she wailed. 'And I gave him everything, everything...'

Pinedo bustled forward. 'You mustn't upset yourself again, my poor Isabella. Go in and lie down and get some rest.'

He put his arm round her. 'You're so good to me,' she sobbed, and broke into a flood of incoherent Spanish. Very gently he led her away.

Left alone with Oliver, Nolan burst out: 'That poor kid! Her mother was murdered, you say?'

But the boy was not listening. Nolan saw him, legs straddled, hands in pockets, frowning down at the carpet.

'How did he know?' he murmured.

'Pinedo, do you mean?' Nolan asked.

But Oliver made no answer. He had crossed to the desk, the usual hotel writing-table without drawers, boasting a note-paper stand and blotter, and was eyeing it sombrely. He glanced about the carpet, peeped into the waste-paper basket and found it empty, and ultimately came to a halt once more before the table. Then, with a sudden exclamation, he pounced upon the blotter and carried it to the mirror above the fireplace. 'Here, quick!' he cried excitedly to Nolan.

Oliver was holding the blotter up in front of the glass. A scrap of blotted writing was reflected. 'Ribeira's reply to that message from Paris, or I'll eat my hat!' the boy exclaimed dramatically. 'Do you see?' He pointed to the fragmentary screed.

This is what they made out:

Bronstei... Hot... Vavas... aris
... rive to... row... Thur...
Ribei...

'Oliver, the Boy Sleuth!' drawled Nolan drily. 'My dear Holmes, this is sheerly miraculous. The name, of course, is Bronstein. But what's the address, my Sherlock? Will you tell me that?'

'The Hotel Vavasour,' Oliver replied promptly. 'You're much too rich to have ever heard of it. But I know it — by name, at any rate. It's a smallish private hotel at the top of the Champs Élysées, near the Étoile. Lots of Americans stay there...'

'And who may this Mr. Bronstein be?' asked Nolan.

'I haven't any idea...'

'Then what's his precise importance...?'

'He's going to help us find our man. Ribeira left this hotel last night without giving any forwarding address...'

Nolan nodded understandingly. 'I see...'

The reappearance of Pinedo interrupted them. He begged them rather fussily to retire. His wife had told them all she knew; he did not want her to be worried further.

'One moment,' exclaimed Oliver with such brisk decisiveness that Nolan fell to studying him reflectively. 'Before we go I want you to be good enough to tell us something about this man Ribeira. In the first place, is that his real name?'

'So far as I know,' was the other's reply. 'When I first met him at Buenos Ayres, he was living in a comfortable way, in an expensive apartment with a servant and a car. He seemed to have plenty of money — he was said to have done well out of real estate. It was only after he carried off my wife that I learned something about his history...'

'Ah...'

'When he first appeared in Buenos Ayres, in conjunction with a Dutchman, whose name I have forgotten, he was running a *tripot* — you know — a gambling-hell, for seamen at La Boca, which, as you may be aware, is a notorious quarter of Buenos Ayres on the water-front.

He appears to have conducted his establishment with discretion — at any rate, the police received no complaints against him. Ultimately, he was lost sight of...'

'One moment,' Oliver interrupted. 'What year would this be? Do you know?'

'I've forgotten, if I was ever told. But no doubt the Buenos Ayres police have it on record. However that may be, eighteen months later — that is to say, before I ran across him — he was back again. He arrived by sea from New York in a German ship and put up at one of our leading hotels. La Boca knew him no more. He rented an office in the business section and dabbled in real estate. I took him to be an Argentine who had made money in the United States and had come home to settle down, and everybody else, I believe, was under the same impression. He might never have been identified with the Ribeira who had kept the gambling-house at La Boca but for an incident, an attempt to blackmail him on the part of this Dutchman, his former associate. Apparently Ribeira was able to hush the matter up — these things can be managed, you know. Nevertheless, a dossier on the case remained in the files of the secret police, and when my wife went away with him, through my personal relations with the head of the Detective Bureau, I enquired into this man's antecedents, and the report was brought to light...'

A tap at the door and a chambermaid announced the doctor. 'Show him in to madame,' said Pinedo. He turned to Nolan as the elder of his two visitors. 'You go to Paris, then?'

'Yeah,' drawled that gentleman.

'You'll be discreet, I beg. It is not for myself I ask it.

Let there be no more scandal. My poor wife has been punished enough...'

The chambermaid called from the bedroom: 'Monsieur, madame wishes to speak to you...'

'I come!' With a distraught air Pinedo offered the two men his hand. 'I trust you, gentlemen. Discretion, I entreat!' He sighed heavily and hurried away.

As the door closed behind the Argentine, Nolan took Oliver's arm. 'Like hell we'll be discreet,' he murmured. 'You and I are going to knock the block off that big cheese with the greatest delicacy, aren't we, my Oliver?' He looked at him quizzingly. 'But why so pensive?'

The boy, sunk in a reverie, did not answer at once. Then he burst out bitterly: 'She's in the hands of that blackguard and we've got to hang about this damned town till the evening train!'

'Train, my foot!' retorted Nolan. 'What's the matter with the racing Renault? The record for Cannes-en-Paris is round about twelve hours. We may not do as well as that, but we'll have a thundering good try. You take the car and nip across to the boat and pack a couple of bags. I want to wire to Paris. We'll go to my sister's apartment: I usually stay with her. It'll be more comfortable than an hotel, I guess, and, as she's at Aix, we shan't be disturbed. I'll send my telegram downstairs and you can pick me up here. Now beat it, quick!'

But the boy lingered. 'There's something I wish you'd do when you're wiring to Paris, Mr. Nolan,' he vouchsafed hesitantly.

'What?'

'Cable the Buenos Ayres police...'

'About Ribeira, you mean?'

'Yes...'

The American yawned. 'We can if you like. But we know this bird's crooked without cabling out to the Argentine, don't we? Besides, we don't want to stir up any more mud than we can help. No, on second thoughts, I don't think we'll cable. We can get young Jack out of his clutches and, maybe, beat him up comfortably without the bulls butting in.'

'I want to cable. I'm going to cable,' rejoined the boy obstinately. 'Only it's expensive and I don't know that I shall have enough money. You see, I want to send at urgent rates. And urgent rates are damnably expensive, at least a dollar a word. We shall have to prepay the reply, too.'

Nolan arched his eyebrows. 'Is it as urgent as all that?'

The boy faltered. 'I don't know... I may be wrong...'

Nolan caught his arm and swung him round. 'What's at the back of your head?'

Oliver flushed up. 'How did this fellow know there was any mystery about her parentage?' he demanded.

'Why, she told him herself, didn't she?'

'That was afterwards. Why was he so excited that day he met her at Mrs. Hersent's? Why did he tell Doña Isabella that his luck had changed? I've been racking my brains to remember what exactly happened that afternoon at the Villa Célandine. I know that Ribeira came in with Mrs. Hersent...' His voice trailed away.

Nolan pointed at the desk. 'Write out your cable,' he said. 'I'll file it with mine.'

'That's devilish decent of you!' Oliver exclaimed. 'Some day I'll pay you back, I swear I will...'

'We're in this together, aren't we? But what are you up to now?'

For Oliver had crossed to the bedroom door and softly rapped it. Pinedo looked out.

'What's the name of your friend in the Buenos Ayres police?' Oliver fired at him.

'Garros...' Pinedo broke off. 'I don't want any scandal, remember. If you thought of cabling, do so in my name.'

'Right,' the boy agreed, 'I will.'

Then Doña Isabella's voice was heard calling, and Pinedo's head was swiftly withdrawn.

'What's our Paris address?' Oliver asked Nolan.

'Rue de Presbourg, 147 bis,' the American responded.

After a moment's thought, the boy scribbled a few lines on a sheet of note-paper and, rising, handed the draft to Nolan. 'Fine,' was that gentleman's comment. '"Urgent!"' he read out. 'That sounds exciting!' He slipped his arm into his companion's and drew him towards the door. But here he stopped and faced the boy.

'Gosh, if you only knew what a kick I get out of having something to do! Oliver, my hearty, I suspect I'm beginning to live!'

CHAPTER XXVIII

BRONSTEIN

Out by the dusty Route de Fréjus they sped, along the coast past La Napoule and Théoule standing up out of the sea, and mounted steeply into the rugged fastnesses of the Esterel, with, far below, a perpetual vista before them of red porphyry rocks fretted by the creaming breakers. An hour had sufficed for their preparations, to have some cold food put up by the chef, a couple of bags packed and the Renault replenished with oil and petrol and its tyres and plugs inspected, Oliver storming behind the leisurely Provençal garage man. The clocks were striking one as they took the road. 'Breakfast in Paris, anyway,' said Nolan, as he climbed into the driving-seat.

To the steady beat of the engine and the thrashing of the wind in their ears, Oliver told his story. A terrible suspicion devoured him and made him ache with remorse for his behaviour to Jack on the previous night. He was glad of the opportunity to arrange his thoughts, to comb the whole, old story out, as his talk with Jack that morning on the diving-raft had recalled it to his memory, to see where it justified the sickening fear that was in his mind.

And so he told his tale in order, as a trained newspaper man would write it, beginning with the murders at Morrisot's, going on to the mystery of the girl's parentage and the identity of the murderer, and ending with his meeting with Jack at Cannes and the events it led up to. He spoke impersonally, leaving the sentimental aspect of their relationship aside. Yet he did not spare himself. He made no secret of his humiliating position in Mousie Hersent's household; indeed, it seemed to him that the feeling of pride, which had made him reluctant to mention his stay at the Villa Célandine, had no place beside his consuming anxiety for Jack.

The only part of the story he glossed over was his final parting from Jack. He could not help remembering that Harvey Nolan had believed in her where he had doubted. He was jealous of the American, torn by a frightful, helpless impulse of jealousy which was redoubled by the knowledge that it was Harvey Nolan's money which now enabled them to go to her aid, and he could not bring himself to admit that his faith had wavered.

'I can't say much, I guess, old man,' said Nolan when the tale was done. 'You've had a raw deal. I wish you'd told me before...'

'Don't let's talk about me,' Oliver replied. 'It's Jack I'm thinking of. Listen to me for a minute, will you? — while I go over these points. First' — he began to check on his fingers — 'so far as we can tell, the only person apart from her mother who knew the identity of this man, this American "Vin," who was Jack's father, was Henri Laurent, the murderer. It was his threat to blackmail her former lover that made Célie give Laurent up to the police. Do you agree?'

'Sure...'

'Secondly, we know from Doña Isabella that Ribeira was highly excited from the moment he met Jack, even before she told him of her parentage. I've been going over in my mind the events of that afternoon at the Villa Célandine. Mrs. Hersent asked Jack her name: she was not content with the Christian name, she wanted the surname as well. Ribeira was present and heard it. On leaving the house he told Doña Isabella that his luck had changed. That same evening he went to Jack and made her an offer that would ensure her being constantly under his surveillance...'

Harvey Nolan turned his head so sharply that the car swerved perilously. 'You're not suggesting...?'

'I'm suggesting nothing... yet. Take Ribeira again. He claims to be an Argentine. But he speaks French like a Parisian...'

'Lots of these dagoes do,' Nolan pointed out.

'Agreed. Here's this consideration. Pinedo says that Ribeira first appeared in Buenos Ayres as keeper of a gambling-hell in the Red-Light quarter. Where did he come from?'

'The B.A. police should tell us that. You asked them in the cable, didn't you?'

'Yes.' He paused. 'Do you know anything about the French penal settlements?'

'There's Devil's Island. It's somewhere in the Pacific, isn't it?'

'That's only one small station. It's off the coast of French Guiana. The principal settlement is on the mainland, and Dutch Guiana and Venezuela are the nearest frontiers. I was reading a book about it a few months ago. Escaping convicts avoid Dutch territory like the devil; the Dutchmen always send them back. Venezuela's easier. Fugitives make for Venezuela in the hope of being able to work their way down through South America...'

'To Buenos Ayres, for instance?'

'Why not? Only a few years ago a fellow got away from Cayenne in a boat, landed on the Venezuelan coast, and tramped all through Venezuela and Colombia until he reached La Paz. Eventually he reached the United States, picked up a good job, married, and settled down. He would never have been recaptured if he hadn't got homesick and gone back to France. They nabbed him then only because he was crazy enough to pass under his own name...'

The face at Oliver's side had grown very grim. 'By God,' said Nolan, 'you make my blood run cold!'

Oliver pounded his hands together nervously. 'And yet,' he rejoined distractedly, 'it can't be he. I've seen Laurent's photograph. As far as I remember, it was a spare, lean face with a bitter mouth, and the newspapers described him as a small, wiry man...'

'Ribeira's short enough,' Nolan observed.

'That's the only point of resemblance, then. Even if you take off the beard, Ribeira's the fat, jovial sort. This fellow Laurent was a viperish-looking scoundrel, by all accounts, the skinny type...'

'Disguise?'

'Not feasible outside the pages of a shocker, at any rate, to that extent...'

'Six years might alter a man's appearance a whole lot, especially a guy who's been in the penitentiary...'

'Possibly. But Jack *saw* Laurent, remember. True, it's six years ago, and it was only for a minute. Still, you'd think she'd have known him again, especially as she says she has never forgotten his appearance. She describes him as a man with a yellow face and sunken cheeks and a snarling expression.' He sighed. 'I don't see it...'

'Then, what?'

The boy frowned. 'I thought that Ribeira might be an emissary of Laurent's, perhaps even a fellow convict.

We know that he's an adventurer, living on women. I've got a vague idea that he has some hold over Mrs. Hersent as well.' And he narrated the conversation he had overheard in the library of the Villa Célandine.

'But what does he hope to get out of Jack, will you tell me that?' Nolan demanded violently.

'Obviously, he, or somebody else, has discovered something in connection with this mysterious father of hers which he thinks may be of use to him.' He paused. 'If Ribeira is an emissary of Laurent's,' he added, 'I think we may take it that Laurent himself is somewhere in the neighbourhood...'

His companion shot him a questioning glance. 'Bronstein?' he queried softly.

'That's just what I was wondering,' said Oliver.

The car seemed to leap forward.

'Fourteen hours, thirteen minutes!'

Nolan's voice rang dully upon Oliver's ear. They had taken turns at driving all through the night. Now they were at the Paris octroi. Oliver was at the wheel. Their faces, their hands, their hair, their clothes were powdered with dust, tinted the same uniform shade of greyness as the black fabric body of the car. In and out of their weary brains a white ribbon of road endlessly seemed to writhe. The cloistered hush of the Paris outskirts in the dawn lay about them; the air was clean-smelling as though it had been freshly washed; the lamps made yellow pools in the black asphalt of the deserted streets. Oliver switched off the headlights and they glided into Paris.

A note from the concierge to say that she had aired beds for them awaited them at the apartment of the rue de Presbourg. Mrs. Rossway was Harvey Nolan's elder sister, who, since the death of her husband, spent most of her time in Europe. There was a pile of dusty circulars on the hall-table, but no cable from Buenos Ayres.

'A drink and a bath, I think,' said Nolan, leading the way into the sitting-room. 'Then bed. We've got a busy day before us.'

Bed? Oliver wanted to protest. They had to find Jack; there was no time to be lost. And there was some one they had to see too, at an hotel. Sleepily, feebly, his mind groped. A glass was thrust into his hand. And a sandwich. Hullo! he had let it fall; he must have dropped off. And here was Harvey Nolan looking at him and laughing. What was he saying? Oh, yes, a bath. He had turned the bath on for him. Dashed funny, that, old Harvey waiting on *him!* Like those country hotels in England at Christmas where the guests serve the staff. Gosh, how gorgeous to wallow in hot water and soak a tired body! He would lie down for half an hour and pull himself together so as to be fresh to go and find Jack. What a divinely comfortable bed! He seemed to drop down through infinity into cool depths of restfulness and peace....

He awoke to hear Harvey Nolan's voice in the sitting-room. He looked at his watch. It was nine o'clock. He scrambled out of bed in a panic. What would Nolan say? At that moment his employer came in. He was already dressed and smoking a cigar — Nolan who rarely opened his eyes before ten.

'I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Nolan,' said the boy. 'I'm afraid I overslept myself.'

'That's all right, son,' remarked the other smilingly. 'You were all in, I'll say. And, listen, you don't have to call me anything but Harvey, see?' And, dismissing the subject with a wave of the hand, he added: 'I've just been telephoning the Meurice...'

'The Meurice?'

'Jack told me she stayed there when she was last up. Nothing doing, and they aren't expected...'

'Don't you think they might be at the Vavasour with Bronstein?'

'I had the same idea, Brother Sherlock. They're not at the Vavasour.'

'Did you ask for Bronstein?'

'No. I thought we'd do better to surprise the gentleman. No reply from Buenos Ayres yet. Get dressed, and after a spot of breakfast we'll go call on Friend Bronstein.'

The reception clerk at the Hôtel Vavasour shook his head. 'We've no gentleman of that name stopping here,' he said to Harvey Nolan. 'There's a Mrs. Bronstein. An American lady...'

Harvey and Oliver exchanged blank glances. The clerk swung the register round and pointed to a name with his pen. They read:

Mrs. Harriet Bronstein, Passaic, New Jersey, U.S.A.

'Would it be the wife of your friend?' the clerk suggested. 'But wait' — he turned to a file of police forms — 'madame is a widow. Not a very young lady. His mother, perhaps?'

A client with a key to deliver up claimed him, another wanted stamps.

'I'd like to see Mrs. Bronstein,' said Harvey. 'Is she in?'

'The telephonist will let monsieur know,' the clerk replied. He cried over his shoulder to the girl at the telephone switchboard behind him: 'See if 364 and 5 is at home. A gentleman to see her.' The hall porter called him away.

The telephone girl executed the commission, then signed to Harvey. 'You are to go up,' she said.

'What does it mean?' whispered Oliver as they ascended in the lift.

'You can search me,' said Harvey Nolan.

CHAPTER XXIX

CHECK

THE woman who received them was a faded blonde, past middle age, neat of build, with a firm, tight mouth and eyes as round as marbles, and as hard. When, in answer to her brisk 'Come!' the two men entered the sitting-room, she stared at them in astonishment.

'Mrs. Bronstein?' Harvey enquired without ceremony.

She looked him up and down, nervous, suspicious.

'That's my name.' The intonation was American. She glanced towards the door and from the door to her visitors again. 'How did you get up here?' she demanded severely.

Nolan ignored the question. 'I wanted to ask you where I can find Mr. Ribeira,' he remarked composedly, peeling off his gloves.

'But I don't know you. Who told you to come up?'

'The telephonist. She rang you, didn't she?'

'Yes. But I thought...' She broke off. 'Who are you, please?'

'My name is Nolan,' said Harvey, 'and this is Mr. Royce. Will you tell us, please, where Mr. Ribeira is staying...'

'How was the name?' Mrs. Bronstein enquired.

'Ribeira.'

She shook her head.

'You've seen him, haven't you?'

'I guess there's some mistake,' she said. 'I don't know the gentleman.'

'But surely! You wired him to Cannes...'

'No, sir!'

'Then perhaps you know the lady he's travelling with, Mademoiselle Morrisot...'

The moment the words were spoken, Oliver, who was watching Mrs. Bronstein's face, perceived that Harvey had made a mistake. A wary glitter appeared in the woman's eyes. But she dropped them at once, looking down at her thick, rather clumsy hands.

'I'm a stranger in Paris,' she answered quietly. 'I have no friends on this side.'

'Do you deny wiring to this man Ribeira at Cannes?'

'I certainly do.'

'Or receiving a telegram from him?'

'Certainly.'

'And if I tell you that I have seen the message addressed to you?'

Her shoulders outlined the merest suggestion of a shrug. All her movements were extremely poised. Her placidity hinted at an iron self-control.

Nolan looked at Oliver as much as to say, 'There's nothing to be done here.' Oliver agreed with a silent glance. He felt sure the woman was lying. She was too glib, too self-assured, to be speaking the truth. The fact that she asked no questions was in itself suspicious.

Nolan picked up his hat. 'In that case, madame, we must apologize for troubling you.'

She inclined her head slightly, and they went out. As the door closed behind them, they heard her at the telephone, brusque and imperious: 'Give me the reception desk!'

On the pavement outside the hotel, they discussed the situation. 'She's a hard-boiled dame, all right,' spake

Nolan disgustedly. 'A regular fourteen-minute egg. And what's more, she saw us coming. Where do we go from here?'

'This washes out our theory that Bronstein might be Laurent, and brings us back to Ribeira,' said Oliver. 'The next move is to get on to Inspector Dufour at the Sûreté — he's the detective who was in charge of the Morrisot case — tell him our tale and hear what he has to say. In the mean time, the reply from Buenos Ayres may have arrived. Suppose you go back to the apartment and if there is a cable, bring it to me here? I've an idea I'd like to mouch round a bit and see how our friend, Mrs. Bronstein, passes her time. I can ring up Dufour from here and make an appointment. And, by the way, we ought to find out some more about Ma Bronstein. Is there any one in America you could cable to for information about her?'

'There's always "The Sentinel,"' drawled Nolan.

'By George, of course,' the boy exclaimed excitedly. 'Will you cable them, Harvey? And tell them to answer quickly. It's urgent.'

'What's the matter with the telephone?' was the quiet answer. He consulted his watch. 'Ten-twenty, that's five-twenty A.M. New York time. Cousin Maurice will be still in bed, I guess. I'll give him a buzz presently and tell him to get busy with the City Editor of the afternoon edition. I'd best stay home till lunch in case they call me back. If you're not at the apartment, say, by one, I'll ring you here. Keep your eye on Harriet. So-long!'

He strolled away, and Oliver reëntered the hotel. On telephoning to police headquarters, he found that Inspector Dufour had been in and gone out again and was not expected back until the afternoon. Oliver left the telephone number of the rue de Presbourg with a message to the Inspector to ring him up there on his return. As he quitted the box, the thought came to him that the hotel telephonist was likely to be better posted than any other employee regarding visitors to the hotel. As he paid for his call, therefore, he said to the girl: 'I hope you didn't get into trouble for sending us up to Madame Bronstein?'

'It appears that madame was expecting some one else...' the telephonist replied coldly.

'Monsieur Ribeira, perhaps?' Oliver suggested. 'How do you think I can remember every name I send up to clients?' she demanded snappishly.

Oliver showed a twenty-franc note. 'Between ourselves, ma petite,' he remarked confidentially, 'I'm particularly anxious to find out whether this gentleman has called. Don't you think you could try and remember?'

The damsel flushed. 'And between ourselves,' she retorted waspishly, slamming a plug home, 'I'm particularly anxious to keep my job. If you've any enquiries to make, you'd better make them at the office.'

Oliver retreated discomfited. It looked as though Mrs. Bronstein had lost no time in putting up a smoke-screen. To make sure, he addressed himself once more to the reception clerk. But here, too, he was now so ungraciously met that he felt his suspicions were corroborated.

He retired to the lounge and sat down to wait. He chose a chair which commanded not only the main entrance but also the lift. A line of shrubs in tubs screened him from view, and every time the lift descended, as an additional precaution, he hid his face behind a newspaper he found lying with a collection of dusty magazines upon a table.

The time dragged. It was past one by the clock over the desk and Harvey had not rung up, nor Mrs. Bronstein appeared. People were drifting into the restaurant for lunch. Suddenly, he shrank back behind his newspaper. Mrs. Bronstein was emerging through the lift gates. She was dressed for the street.

She paused a moment by the elevator to treat the lounge to a leisurely survey. Hardly daring to breathe, the boy watched her.

She must have telephoned down for a cab. At any rate, when Oliver reached the door, the taxi into which the porter was assisting her — a shining, peacock-blue Citroën — was the only one visible in the quiet backwater of the Champs Élysées in which the Hôtel Vavasour was situated. By the time Oliver reached the pavement, the Citroën was halfway down the street. To keep it in sight, he had to run.

Then an empty cab overtook him. Without waiting for the astonished chauffeur to halt, Oliver swung himself onto the running-board. 'A hundred francs if you keep that taxi in sight,' he panted, pointing down the street. The driver's face lit up as he trod on the accelerator.

The blue taxi had turned the corner into the Champs Élysées. As they swung round after it, they saw their quarry scudding down the broad avenue towards the distant vista of the Tuileries. At the Place de la Concorde a traffic block cut the chase across, and with a sinking heart Oliver watched the Citroën disappear in the opening of the rue Royale.

They lost it by the Printemps, picked it up again in the rue du Havre, then saw it jump to a chance to swing out of the line of traffic to pass through the gates of the Saint-Lazare Station. Oliver's cab was penned in the line. He had his hundred francs ready; he crushed the note into the driver's hand and launched himself in pursuit. Already the Citroën had stopped at the station steps; what was happening beyond he could not see, for the throng of people passing up and down. But when he reached the stairs himself, the blue cab was moving away empty.

Mrs. Bronstein was nowhere to be seen.

Cursing his luck, he tore up the steps and dashed into the enormous station hall. If there were one place in Paris where it was easy to throw off pursuit, it was the hall of this vast terminus, swarming like a beehive and with a multiplicity of exits and entrances. Frantically, he elbowed his way through the jostling press whose feet rustled like wind in the tress under the echoing roof.

Mrs. Bronstein had given him the slip, there was no doubt about it. Purposely, he told himself wrathfully. For an American she must know her Paris well. He hung about for an hour or more in a vain hope that she might reappear, then, disconsolate, took a taxi to the rue de Presbourg.

It was after three when he let himself into the apartment with the key that Harvey had given him. Harvey met him in the hall. 'Gee, I thought something had happened to you!' he exclaimed. 'Have you had lunch?'

'I don't want to eat,' the boy said wearily. 'I've mucked things up, Harvey. I let that damned woman slip through my fingers.'

Nolan impelled him forward along the hall. 'You come right in and feed,' he bade him. 'And while you're eating, I'll tell you some news.'

'Has Buenos Ayres answered?'

'No. It's about Jack. I believe we've traced her father.'

CHAPTER XXX

THE SCENT GROWS WARM

He had a spry, tense air which had little about it of the Harvey Nolan who had idled through the long days at Cannes. Oliver marvelled at the change in him.

'I called Cousin Maurice,' said Nolan. 'He didn't much like being dug out of bed. But he's a good skate and he got busy. An hour ago the city desk of "The Sentinel" came through. They're wise to Mrs. B. all right. She used to keep some kind of a honkytonk in the West Forties...' Seeing Oliver's bewilderment, he translated: 'A night-club, you know, in the theatre district. But this is the point. She's Vincent Cranston's mother-in-law...'

Oliver looked up from his cold chicken. 'I don't follow...'

Nolan's eyes snapped. '"Vincent," I said, didn't I? What's short for Vincent, Lightning?'

The lad laid down his knife and fork. '"Vin," of course.' His face lit up. 'I say, Harvey, we're getting warm, aren't we? But you speak as though Vincent Cranston were somebody one ought to know. Who is he?'

Nolan laughed. 'You wouldn't have asked that question twenty years ago. Not in America, anyway. Vin Cranston was the regular type of rich man's son whose one idea in life is to have the whale of a time on his dad's money. I was at Harvard when he was stepping out, and, believe me, it was some stepping. He was one of the

Cranstons, the Pennsylvania tinplate people, and even they didn't have enough dollars to keep him in candles to burn at both ends and through the middle. Well, to make a gay story short, what with booze and the rest of it, by about the age of thirty all that baby was fit for was the strait-jacket. He pulled himself together a bit in his later years, but when I last saw him — it was at Palm Beach, two seasons back — he was just a mess. He was always supposed to be a confirmed bachelor. But soon after this, he landed up on the front page again by marrying a gay sister, one Mae Carew, a Follies girl...'

'Mrs. Bronstein's daughter, eh?'

'Exactly. The next thing that happened was that Vin got full of booze last Christmas and killed himself and his bride in a car wreck in the Adirondacks. That was how "The Sentinel" were hep to Ma B.' He shook his head in self-reproach. 'I guess I don't read the American papers the way I should, or I'd have remembered the name. It seems she was in the news quite a bit over Vin Cranston's money.'

'Oh?' said Oliver, impressed.

'It appears that when he and the lady took their toss over the cliff there was a doubt as to which one of them died first. The point was important, as, if she had died before he did, his money would have gone back to his family. Not that he had a great deal to leave, for, before the old man died, Vin was cut out of the will. But he had a certain amount from his mother. And this he had left absolutely to the fair Mae. Well, evidence was eventually brought to show that while he was dead when they were found, the wife was still breathing, though she died directly after, with the result that her next-of-kin, namely, old Mother Bronstein, came in for Vin's money.'

'How much was it, do you know?'

'Nothing very exciting, from what "The Sentinel" told me, but better than a kick in the pants. Round about two hundred thousand dollars.'

There was a brief silence. Oliver mused: here's Ribeira who knows the truth about Jack's parentage and here's Mrs. Bronstein, come post-haste from America, no doubt in response to those cables of Ribeira's of which Doña Isabella had spoken. And Jack, his little Jack, who had given him her lips to kiss, was the centre of this web whose threads stretched out across the Atlantic. Two hundred thousand dollars, forty thousand pounds: the weight of all that money seemed to crush his heart. He spoke his thought aloud, striving to make his voice nonchalant: 'And you think that Jack might be the lawful heir?'

'Not unless her mother and Cranston were married, of course. Did you ever hear any suggestion of it?'

Oliver shook his head. 'I expect only Ribeira and Mrs. B. can tell us the truth about that.'

'I'll say you're right. Ribeira knows something and Mrs. B. is here to find out what he knows. This explains old man Ribeira's sudden interest in Jack, doesn't it?'

Oliver raised a haggard face. 'It's ghastly to think of her in that blackguard's power. What do they know about this Mrs. Bronstein?'

'Nothing good. The joint she ran in New York was pretty rough, I gather. In the mean time, to try and discover whether Vincent Cranston really was Jack's father, I asked "The Sentinel" to get my lawyer in New York to ring me here. I shall tell Fraser the whole story and have him see the Cranston family and hear what they've got to say. He ought to come through any minute now...'

'The Bronstein woman knows where Ribeira is. And where Ribeira is, Jack is, too. If we stick to Mrs. Bronstein close enough, she'll lead us to them. And I swear she'll not slip me again. Let's go back to the Vavasour.'

Very firmly Nolan pressed the lad back into his chair. 'Easy, son. I can't leave until Fraser comes through. I said I'd be here right along. Didn't you tell me, too, that you were expecting your detective pal to telephone you here? And that cable from the Buenos Ayres police must arrive any minute now. Without something more definite than mere suspicion against Ribeira, we'll find it pretty difficult to get the Paris police to act. Better wait, boy!'

'Harvey, I can't!' Oliver broke in desperately. 'I'm going back to the Vavasour.'

'And if the dame is still out? Don't waste your energy unnecessarily.' He pointed to the telephone on the desk. 'Ring up and find out first if she's back.'

'Pah, they'll only lie to me! I tell you she has warned them to answer no enquiries about her movements...'

'Then give Ribeira's name.'

Oliver's face cleared. 'By Jove, that's an idea...'

He rang up the hotel and told the voice that answered (he recognized the telephone's girl's brusque tones) that Monsieur Ribeira desired to speak with Madame Bronstein. After a longish wait, he was informed that the lady was not there.

'You see?' he declaimed furiously to Nolan.

'She's probably still out,' said the other soothingly. 'Patience, old man,' he went on. 'I know that this hanging around is rotten, but' — he tapped the table — 'the information centre is here.'

'Patience?' the boy snorted. He began to stride up and down the room.

'Suppose you call police headquarters and see if your man is back?' Nolan suggested. He had cleared the end of the table and, having fetched a pack of cards from the desk, now proceeded to lay out a hand at Canfield.

Once more Oliver picked up the telephone. But once more he was disappointed. Inspector Dufour had not returned. A silence fell upon the room. Oliver resumed his striding while, with unshakeable calm, his friend played out his hand.

The telephone was silent: the front-door bell likewise. At five o'clock, Madame Julie, the concierge, brought them some tea. Oliver paused in his restless pacing to drink a cup. But Nolan mixed himself a whiskey-and-soda. At five-thirty, 'I'm sorry, Harvey,' Oliver burst out, 'but I shall go mad if I stay here. I'm going out...'

'Where?'

'To the Vavasour. She must be back by now. If she goes out again, she'll not escape me. Can I take the car? It will make me feel more mobile...'

'Sure. It's in the courtyard.' Nolan paused. 'You'll be careful, old hoss? If Ribeira's the man we take him to be, he's as dangerous as a mad dog...'

'It's because I realize that, damn it, that I want to get Jack away from him!'

'I don't want to have you imagine I'm any less anxious than you about her because I take it more easily,' said Nolan.

The boy flushed. 'I know that, Harvey. But I must feel that I'm doing something to find her. You understand?'

'Sure,' drawled the American. 'But keep in touch. And watch your step!'

At the Hôtel Vavasour the snippy telephonist was still at her switchboard. But a fresh clerk was on duty at the reception desk. Oliver lounged over and asked for Mrs. Bronstein. The clerk glanced behind him at the array of pigeon-holes and keys. 'Madame must be out,' he said. 'At least, her key is there.' He looked down at the ledger before him. 'Wait,' he corrected himself, 'madame has left.'

Dumbfounded, Oliver stared at him. 'Left?' he faltered. 'For good?'

'I think so,' the clerk replied. He called to the hall porter, who confirmed the statement, pointing to a pile of luggage. 'These are madame's trunks,' he explained.

Oliver turned to the clerk in a panic. 'Did she leave any forwarding address?'

'No, sir.'

'We are sending her trunks to the American Express,' the porter put in.

No doubt seemed possible. The evidence of the luggage was unanswerable. The wardrobe trunk, the suitcases, the hatbox, were lettered 'H. B.' and bore labels besides, carefully addressed in her name, care of the American Express, rue Scribe.

She had tricked them. In his haste to follow her, it had never occurred to him that she might change her hotel. She had quietly shaken him off her trail in the maëlstrom of the Saint-Lazare Station and gone to her new address, where, in due course, her baggage would follow her. Their last connecting thread with Jack was broken. He felt stunned.

A shrill voice broke in upon his sombre reverie. The telephone girl was violently apostrophizing the reception clerk. 'Why wasn't I told she was going?' she demanded. 'She has three trunk calls to pay for...'

'It's nothing to do with me, I tell you,' said the clerk. 'Was I on duty at the time? Eh, bien...'

'Six francs a call it costs to Rotival,' the girl expostulated. 'And she had three calls, your Madame Bronstein. Eighteen francs, and they will charge it to me, nom d'un chien!'

But Oliver had ceased to listen. Rotival! Rotival-sur-Seine! Why, that was where Mousie Hersent's house was! With lightning quickness his mind snatched up the links; Mousie Hersent — Ribeira. And Rotival was on the State Railway; to go there you took the train from the Saint-Lazare Station. So that was where Mrs. Bronstein had been bound for.

There was a Michelin Guide in Harvey Nolan's car. Oliver looked up the road; it was, he judged, about forty minutes' fast run. Five minutes later, he was speeding out of Paris by the Avenue de la Grande Armée, racking his brains in vain to remember the name of Mousie Hersent's villa.

A bridge across the Seine; a street of stucco houses running at right angles to the stream; and a sprinkling of villas clambering up the wooded hillside from the road along the river-bank — that was Rotival. The Renault nosed its way slowly up the village street. The post-office, Oliver decided, should be able to tell him where Mrs. Hersent lived.

A little open space, some red-brick buildings, announced the railway station. A porter was visible talking to a woman with a dog. In a small place like Rotival, Oliver reflected, the station porter was likely to be acquainted with the principal local residents. He swung the car into the yard and drew up alongside the man.

As he did so, the woman with the dog, who had her back to the street, turned about.

It was Fitchie.

CHAPTER XXXI

IN WHICH AN OLD FRIEND OF OLIVER'S LETS IN SOME MORE LIGHT

FITCHIE'S face, which always displayed the roseate shine of a winter apple, was redder than its wont. Her hair straggled out from under her hat, which was perched askew on her head. Her shoes were covered with dust. The dog, in which Oliver with some difficulty recognized Mrs. Hersent's precious Pekinese, looked even more dishevelled than she. His coat was matted with mud and he lay on the ground, wheezing like a metronome, his pink blotting-paper tongue lolling out, too tired even to tug at his leash.

'Why, only fancy seeing you!' Mrs. Hersent's companion ejaculated ecstatically and pulled her hat straight. 'And, oh, *may*, what a perfectly gorgeous car! You must think I look a Perfect Sight. If you only knew the time I've had! Chéri was lost. I've been the whole afternoon running round looking for that —— dog!'

She rolled out the sanguinary expletive with such gusto that the boy burst into laughter.

'I can't help it!' she declared. 'I've had no lunch and I've been Absolutely Distracted. You know what Mousie is about the wretched animal. I've missed every possible train to Paris and it's half an hour before the next. Wouldn't you like to take me across to the café over there and give me a cup of tea?'

'Of course!' Oliver jumped out of the car.

Fitchie was hauling on Chéri's leash. 'Come up, you foul little beast!' she vociferated. 'Ugh!' she went on to Oliver as the Peke reluctantly struggled to his bandy legs, 'how I hate that dog!'

'You've missed Mousie,' she said, as they crossed the station square. 'She went on to London this morning. I'm going on to-night *via* Southampton with the heavy luggage. And I was *so* looking forward to a nayce, quiet afternoon all on my little lonesome in Paris. Instead, I've spent the whole time chasing after that devilish Chéri.'

They sat down in the sunshine outside the minute Café de la Gare. Oliver ordered her tea, and, discovering that she had not lunched, a ham roll. He waited until she had been served, and then, striving to mask his eagerness, said: 'It's tremendously fortunate meeting you like this, Fitchie, because there's something you can tell me. Have you seen anything of our friend, Ribeira?'

The companion sniffed audibly. 'Seen him?' she repeated with emphasis. 'And hasn't his lordship turned us out of house and home?'

'You mean — you mean — he's staying at Mousie's place here?'

'Certainly...'

'Alone? Is he alone?'

His tone was so violent that she stared at him. 'Why you're all upset, I declare!' she cried. Then she smiled archly: 'Of course, I was forgetting about your little lady friend...'

'She's with him? You've seen her?'

'Dear me,' said Fitchie, 'if you aren't in a state! You'll make me spill my tea. No, I haven't seen her. He's by himself. I thought she was at Cannes still with Doña Isabella. Isn't she?'

'Never mind about that now. Go on about Ribeira. When did he arrive?'

Miss Fitch bridled as she poured herself another cup. 'You may well ask about him. It's Most Mysterious, the whole affair. Mousie arrived only the day before yesterday, by road, you know. I'd come on ahead by train, to get the house ready, as I always do. We expected to be here until the summer, when we got to Marienbad for Mousie's cure. But after lunch yesterday, when I was having forty winks upstairs, Mousie sends for me. Who's with her but Ribeira. My dear, you might have knocked me down with a feather, as the saying goes. And Mousie as sweet as syrup after declaring she'd never speak to him again after the way he'd treated her over that girl from Victor's — but you know all about that. She tells me as calm as calm that Ribeira is moving into the house to-day and that we're going to London...'

'And he's there now?'

'Very much so.' The tart voice trembled a little. 'My lord, ever so high and mighty, arrived at ten o'clock this morning in his own car with his own man, and a nice specimen to look at he was, about five foot high, as broad as he's long, and a broken nose. Well! Mousie went off an hour later to catch the noon boat train from Paris, leaving me alone with those two beauties. He was most annoyed at my remaining behind to finish the packing and tried to get Mousie to take me with her. But Mousie was already taking Marie and insisted on my staying. Apart from the packing we had three servants coming in to-morrow — we engage them fresh every season, you understand? — and of course I forgot until this morning that their engagements had to be countermanded. That took a time, too, getting on to the registry office in Paris by telephone and arguing with them. All the time Ribeira was at my back, hustling me, and in the end he fairly ran me out to my cab. The brute didn't even invite me to have a mouthful of lunch, although this Caliban of his was in the kitchen, making him an omelette. And then the damned dog gets lost! It's been such a day!'

She heaved a deep sigh and attacked her sandwich.

'Did he say anything about getting a room ready for a guest?' Oliver enquired.

'Not to me. Anyway, I should have heard if he had.'

'And Mousie let him turn her out like that, at short notice? Didn't she say anything to you about it?'

'Not a word. But Mousie can be deep enough if she likes.'

'Fitchie,' said Oliver suddenly, 'just what hold has this man over Mousie, do you know?'

The companion darted him a keen glance out of her piercing black eyes. 'It's funny your asking me that. What's in your mind?'

'I just wondered...'

She laid down her knife. 'You tell and perhaps I will,' she remarked with a knowing air.

'Well,' the young man began slowly, 'you remember the first time he came to the Villa Célandine? It was the day I arrived. I walked into the boudoir unexpectedly and overheard them talking in the library next door. Mousie's voice was excited and upset. She said something about it being the last time and more than flesh and blood would stand; anyway, I had the impression that he had been getting something out of her. Afterwards, he was careful to explain to me that he'd merely been remonstrating with her for the sort of people she played around with, and she didn't like it. But since then I've been thinking...'

'When was this?' Fitchie interrupted briskly.

'It was the Sunday I came to the villa to stay.'

'The date of the month, I mean?'

'I should have it down here.' He had produced his diary and was fluttering the leaves. The thirtieth of March.'

The companion had taken a scrap of paper from her bag. 'On the thirtieth of March,' she announced solemnly, 'Mousie drew a cheque for fifty thousand francs in his favour. Altogether, over a period of three months, he had two hundred thousand francs out of her. Mousie forgot her writing-case this morning. I — er' — Fitchie coughed delicately — 'was just putting it straight when I came across the cancelled cheques in a bundle. The most recent is dated March thirtieth. It appears to have been the only one he collected in person: she must have posted him the others...'

'Blackmail, eh?' Oliver suggested.

Fitchie nodded vigorously. 'That's the way of it, it strikes *me*. There were a lot of love-letters there, too, dating from the time Mousie was in Buenos Ayres. I wasn't with her then, but' — she tittered — 'it seems to have been *quayte* an affair. Such passion; Spaniards are so full-blooded, are they not? To read his letters you'd never think that Mr. Ribeira was one of those gentlemen who make it their business to find out all about the pasts of the ladies they have affairs with.'

'Meaning that Mousie has a past?'

The companion's eyes glinted spitefully. 'I can trust you not to repeat what I say: you know what *I* think of her. Yes, Mousie has a past all right. Seeing her so fashionable and la-di-dah at Cannes you'd never imagine she'd been kept for years by a publican in the Midlands, would you? It's his money she spends. He left it all to her when he died.'

'Unconventional,' was Oliver's comment, 'but scarcely actionable, is it?'

'She'd die sooner than have her swell friends know it. But that's not all.' The weather-beaten face was flinty. 'Mousie went through some stormy years before she met him. She doesn't dream that I know this. But it's true. She has been in gaol.'

'You don't mean it!'

'It's a fact. At one time she had a lodging-house in London, in the Euston Road. Not very respectable, if you know what I mean. The police raided it, and she went to prison. Six months I believe they gave her.' Her voice grew suddenly shrill. 'If I weren't such a rotten little coward, I'd treat her the same as Ribeira did. I'd make her pay, and pay well, and all the time, for her insults to me, her continual beastly rudeness...'

She broke off short, and, as though to relieve her feelings, pushed the tea-tray from her with a vigorous shove. Oliver contemplated her in silence. He had a vision of these two women, both with their youth behind them, travelling, year in, year out, in one another's company from one pleasure resort to another, the one fearing, the other hating.

Fitchie had produced a vanity-case and was daubing her face with powder. 'Tell me more about Ribeira,' she said. 'Who is he?'

'That's what I'm here to find out,' the boy replied. 'But I can tell you now that Doña Isabella isn't his sister. She's a married woman he ran away with. Now he's left her in the lurch at Cannes and disappeared with Jacqueline Morrisot.' He flushed a little. 'The girl, you know...

Fitchie whistled. 'He's consistent, anyway...'

'Don't get this wrong, Fitchie,' Oliver pleaded earnestly. 'Jack hasn't any idea of the kind of man he is, and I mean to rescue her from him.'

'Well, she's not with him at Les Charmettes — Mousie's house, you know.'

'Yes, I couldn't remember the name. And there was no mention of her, you say?'

'No. Incidentally, our friend had a lady calling on him at the house when I went back there this afternoon...'

'A lady?' cried Oliver excitedly. 'A Mrs. Bronstein, was it?'

'I didn't hear the name. I only caught a glimpse of her in the hall...'

'An American, isn't she? Middle-aged, with rather a hard face and a leathery skin?'

'That sounds like her, certainly...'

'Tell me about her, for God's sake, Fitchie,' he implored. 'You don't know what it means to me. Just a moment, before you start. This woman isn't staying there, is she?'

'I don't think so. Ribeira drove away with her in his car about four o'clock...'

'Right. Now fire away.'

'There isn't much to tell, really. When I left Les Charmettes this afternoon, about two o'clock, Ribeira bundled me out in such a hurry that, when I reached the station, I had nearly an hour to wait for my train. So I tied Chéri up to a bench on the platform and went for a stroll. When I returned, the dog had disappeared. Well, I made some enquiries round about, but nobody seemed to have seen the little beast. Then the thought struck me that he might have run off home. As I didn't dare leave France without him — he was to go into quarantine at Southampton — I had to let my train go. It was two hours until the next, so I said to myself I'd walk back to Les Charmettes on the chance of coming across Chéri on the way — we're about twenty-five minutes' walk from the station. Well, I toiled all the way to the front gate and up the avenue without setting eyes on the filthy animal, so I thought I'd ask at the house if they'd seen anything of him...'

'What time would this have been?' Oliver put in.

'Round about half-past three, I should say. Ribeira himself answered the bell. This woman was in the hall, and I then remembered meeting an empty station fly on the river road coming from our direction. I started to explain very politely about Chéri being lost — I hope I'm always polite with people — and what do you think that savage did? He said, "Go to the devil!" and banged the door in my face.' She tittered acidly. 'Mousie may snub me, I dare say, but I never let myself be put upon by others, I assure you. So I rang and rang again. But they wouldn't open the door, and in the end,' she finished flatly, 'I went back to the station. Oh, and I ought to say that soon after I had got back to the village, Ribeira passed me in his car. He was driving and the woman was beside him. They crossed the bridge and took the Paris road, so I presume he was driving her back to Paris...'

At that moment the sound of a train entering the station drifted across the little square. Fitchie looked at her watch. 'Gracious, it's my train! If I miss this, I can't cross to-night!' She grabbed her bag and sprang to her feet. Oliver flung some money on the tray and they sprinted across the *place*.

'There's so much I have to ask you,' he said to Fitchie, as, with the hateful Chéri clasped to her flat chest, she gazed down upon him from the window of her second-class carriage. 'Tell me quickly how I get to Les Charmettes.'

'You turn to the right at the bridge and follow the road along the river-bank until you've passed the last villa,' she explained. 'About a quarter of a mile beyond that there's a steep side-road leading to the front gate, a white gate, you can't mistake it.' She glanced at him rather apprehensively. 'I wouldn't tackle Ribeira alone, if I were you. Is there no one you can take with you?'

'I'm not frightened of him,' retorted the boy confidently. 'By the way,' he added, as if struck by a sudden thought, 'there's something you could do for me in Paris if you had five minutes to spare.'

'I shall have forty minutes, if this train is on time. What is it?'

He had torn a leaf from his diary and was scribbling on it. 'Ring up this number and ask for Harvey Nolan — I've written down the name so you won't forget it. Tell him from me that Ribeira is at Les Charmettes, and that I've gone out there to interview him. If Nolan's out, leave the message with the concierge. She seems intelligent, but make her read it back to you. If you'll do that for me, you'll be saving my time. I know these French telephones; it would take me an age to get through to Paris from this nest.'

With a sudden jerk, after the manner of French trains, the train started. Fitchie leaned forward and, her eyes tender, said softly: 'Good luck, old boy. I hope you find her.'

CHAPTER XXXII

JACK ENCOUNTERS A PROBLEM

When Ribeira arrived at the station at Cannes with the announcement that Doña Isabella did not feel equal to the journey, Jack at once offered to remain behind. But Ribeira would not hear of it. He had booked the berths, he declared, and he would not have the money for two wasted. It would do Isabella good to have a day or two to herself to get over her tantrums. As the train was within a minute or two of starting, Jack's only alternative would have been to jump out onto the platform.

So she contented herself with the assurance that Doña Isabella would rejoin them presently in Paris. She was used to Ribeira making any such major plans for them as their unexpected departure for Paris represented, and since Doña Isabella never appeared to question his dispositions, it did not occur to Jack to do so. He told her that it would be just as well if Isabella were out of the way for a bit, as his intention was to find a nice house somewhere on the outskirts of Paris where the three of them could rest from the fatigues of the Riviera season.

'We're all tired out,' he said, 'and the spring in the neighbourhood of Paris is so beautiful. I have my eye on a delightful place and it will be far better for Isabella to join us there after we're comfortably installed.'

In the mean time his idea was that in Paris they should go for the night to the P.L.M. Terminus Hotel, and, if he should succeed in securing the house he had in mind, move in on the following day.

Jack acquiesced in the plan without suspicion. It confirmed an idea she had formed that Ribeira was anxious to retrench. She was not deceived by Doña Isabella's explanation about the missing jewellery, and she was even prepared to discover that Ribeira had pledged the pearls to raise funds for their sudden journey to Paris.

Arrived in Paris next day, they went, as arranged, to the P.L.M. Terminus Hotel in the rather arid quarter of river wharves and warehouses in which the great station is situated. Ribeira departed immediately on his affairs. Jack lunched by herself and afterwards took the Métro to the Place de l'Opéra, and spent the afternoon looking at the shops. Ribeira rejoined her at the hotel for dinner and told her that he had secured the house on which he had set his heart.

It was at Rotival-on-the-Seine, about forty kilomètres from Paris. He was going off there the first thing after breakfast to make the final arrangements and would send a car for her in the course of the morning. He suggested, therefore, that she should not go out. She told him she would stay in and write to Doña Isabella.

'Oh, but you mustn't do that!' he exclaimed at once. 'That would spoil everything. This is to be a surprise for her. My plan is for you and me, my little Jack, to get the house quite ready and then wire Isabella to come to Paris. We'll meet her at the train and drive her out to Rotival without saying where we're going; the situation is perfect, with large grounds: — she'll be entranced. We mustn't tell her a word beforehand...'

'All right,' said Jack, 'I won't mention it, if you don't want me to. I'll just write her a little note and tell her I'm sorry she's been feeling seedy...'

But to this he likewise demurred. 'I know Isabella,' he remarked. 'When she has these obstinate fits, it's much the best thing to leave her alone. I beg of you, therefore, my little one,' he added firmly, 'not to write.'

'But what will she think of me? It seems so callous...'

'Never mind about that. You will please do as I say.'

At that she shrugged her shoulders and relapsed into silence. After all, she was the employee of these people. But she resolved, if Doña Isabella should reproach her, to tell her the truth.

As they were staying only for the night, she had told the porter to leave their trunks in the hall. On their way out from the restaurant she noticed their pile of baggage standing there and perceived that Doña Isabella's two wardrobe trunks were missing. A closer inspection revealed the fact that none of Doña Isabella's things were in the heap. Knowing that she had registered Doña Isabella's heavy luggage through from Cannes with her own, Jack went to Ribeira in some alarm. But he only laughed and told her that, on his sister declining to travel with them, he had had her trunks taken out of the van. 'You know how fussy she is,' he observed with a resigned air. 'Isabella without all her possessions about her would be lost.'

Jack felt faintly disturbed. She wondered how long it would be before Isabella joined them. The prospect of staying alone indefinitely with Ribeira in a country house did not especially commend itself to her. She could not help remembering that, hitherto, there had always been Doña Isabella in the background. And Oliver Royce's hateful imputation dwelt unpleasantly in her mind. She told herself that Ribeira's attitude towards her had been beyond reproach, that she was a fool to pay any heed to ill-natured gossip. For all that, Ribeira awed her. Whenever they were alone together, she had the impression that he was rigorously holding himself in check. She dimly apprehended that his self-control masked a primitive ruthlessness which, she conceived, might easily prove terrifying. Well, she reflected, if Oliver Royce heard of her and Ribeira hobnobbing together in the solitude of this idyllic river retreat, he would have some grounds for his insulting suggestion. She smiled to herself rather ruefully as she went up to bed.

Ribeira was out of the hotel next morning by the time she was up and dressed. But towards eleven o'clock he came through on the telephone from Rotival to say that the car would call for her soon after one o'clock: she had better have an early lunch. She was actually drinking her coffee when she was fetched outside to find an enormously thickset man, in a shabby jacket suit and chauffeur's cap, loading her things onto a cumbrous, rather old-fashioned limousine.

He was a fellow of unprepossessing appearance with a broken nose and a flabby white face, the lower part of which was darkened with an abundant stubble. Still, he addressed her civilly enough, asked if she were Mademoiselle Morrisot, and said that the 'patron' had sent him to bring her to Les Charmettes. By half-past one they were headed westward through Paris.

Les Charmettes! The name pleased her and, indeed, her first impressions of Rotival were favourable enough. It was a mild spring afternoon with the first green showing on the trees, and the little village, with its tiny landing-stage, its old grey church, and line of open-air restaurants, where on Sundays Parisians ate a fry of fresh fish caught in the river and danced afterwards under the planes in the garden, was placid and restful.

They crossed the bridge and, turning left-handed, followed the river-bank. It was a scene of peace. On one side was the river, glassy, deep green, and swift, flowing between low, reedy banks; on the other, behind severe iron gates, wooded avenues at intervals led to the chalets which, on the road, and here and there upon the precipitate hillside beyond, thrust their roofs from among the rook-haunted elms; ahead lush green meadows, glittering with traces of the winter floods, showed cows, a spire or two, like a Dutch landscape. Rotival was a week-end resort, Jack concluded. No doubt Sundays brought the cars, the launches, the gramophones, the loud-speakers. On a week-day like this the whole environment was steeped in solitude.

The last chalet was behind them, and walled grounds had given place to a waste of scrub, when a side-road presented itself. Taking it, they mounted a rise between trees to a pair of high white gates, where the car turned in. Of lodge there was none, but the gates stood open, and in second gear they climbed noisily round the bends of a moss-grown drive which ended before a long, low, timber-fronted bungalow.

It was new and very spruce, in hue a cheerful, creamy yellow, with diamond panes in the windows and bright blue curtains showing behind. As the car drew up, Ribeira loomed large in the doorway. He was smiling broadly and smoking a large cigar. 'Welcome to Les Charmettes!' he cried jovially, and, gripping his cigar in his teeth, he clamped his two hands about Jack's waist and lifted her to the ground.

'Well,' he vociferated, 'what do you think of our cottage? Only the birds to disturb us here.' He waved a fat hand. 'All those bushes beside the house are roses; a little while and the gardens will be a dream of beauty. And the view across the Seine Valley from the upstairs windows, superb! But come, I'll show you your room and you shall see for yourself. Michel here' — he turned to the chauffeur — 'will bring up your luggage...'

So saying, he brought her into the house. There was a lounge hall, low-pitched and irregularly shaped and attractive, with a recess built out at the side with French windows opening upon the rose gardens, a staircase mounting to the upper storey, and, on the other side, the dining-room. Everything was spick and span and very comfortable, with bright rugs and pretty chintzes and big armchairs.

Ribeira insisted on Jack inspecting everything, even to the kitchen, and, as she followed him from room to room, she found herself very favourably impressed with Les Charmettes. Neque was quite right, she told herself, as they went upstairs. She was tired. A rest in this pleasant house, amid these peaceful surroundings, would be good for them all three.

But she was somewhat intrigued to perceive no trace of servants in the place. The kitchen was deserted, the range cold. Was she to stay at Les Charmettes alone with these two men, Neque and his singularly repulsive-looking chauffeur? She raised the point with Ribeira as they stood at her bedroom window gazing across the tree-tops at the distant plain with the gleaming river winding through it.

'Servants? But that is one of the matters I wish you to attend to before Isabella arrives. I have written to a registry office in Paris about it. In the mean time, Michel will look after us very well. He is a splendid cook, not a very handsome one, perhaps, eh, mon vieux?' — he turned to the chauffeur who was bringing in Jack's trunk — 'but a regular handy man. If you want anything, my little Jack, just ask Michel.' He gave her shoulder a friendly pat. 'You wish to unpack, I expect, so I'll leave you. Do you think you're going to like your new abode?'

'Oh, yes,' said Jack, 'I think it's charming.'

'A regular love-nest,' he chuckled. 'Ah, my little Jack, if I were twenty years younger, we could do with one another's company very well alone, I dare say.' He laid a soft hand on her head. 'How lovely your hair is! Do you see I gave you the green room to go with it? And your skin is so white. Do you know how pretty you are, my dear?'

He drew his hand caressingly over the back of her head and along the nape of her neck. She detached it firmly.

'Now, Neque, I'm going to turn you out. I want to change my frock.'

'All right, I'm off.' As he turned, she caught the glint of his eyes behind his glasses. Their expression gave her a little feeling of panic. He paused. 'Do you like me, my little Jack?' he queried gently.

'You know I do...'

'Then give your old Neque a little kiss to show you're pleased with the house he's found for you...'

He spoke jovially enough, but his voice was tremulous. Jack did not move. 'Come on, I shan't eat you,' he encouraged her. She bent forward quickly and gave him a little peck on the forehead. Instantly his arms went out and he tried to draw her to him. But she extricated herself deftly. 'Now be off with you,' she told him, 'and let me unpack.'

He laughed and lumbered away. Jack looked after him with a considering air, then went and locked the door. She crossed slowly to the mirror and, arms akimbo, addressed her reflection in the glass. 'Zut!' she remarked. 'You might have known! All men are the same!' She remained lost in thought.

At last, with a sobered mien, she opened the suitcase which contained her night things and took out the pretty white-and-gold kimono she had bought with her new outfit in Paris. Then, slipping off her frock and shoes, she donned wrapper and slippers and turned to her trunk. But when she looked for the key, she discovered that her handbag with her bunch of keys was missing.

CHAPTER XXXIII

RIBEIRA'S VISITOR

SHE remembered bringing her bag in with her from the car; she must have put it down somewhere while going over the downstairs rooms. The discovery was vexing. There was a bell beside the bed, but she was not too keen about bringing Michel — or, as far as that went, his master, either — up to the bedroom when she was half-dressed. There was nothing for it — she would have to fetch the bag herself. She unlocked the door, opened it, and listened. The house was profoundly quiet. She advanced to the head of the stairs and peeped over: the lounge was empty.

She ran swiftly down, noiseless in her slippered feet. Her bag was not to be seen in the hall. A glance into the dining-room likewise failed to reveal it. Then it suddenly occurred to her that she had gone into the recess on the far side of the lounge; Ribeira had opened one of the windows giving on the rose garden to show her how agreeable the room would be in summer when the roses were out.

The recess was shaped like an inverted L, a retreat for bridge or tea, which, by means of curtains, could be cut off from the hall. At the end, which windows on three sides converted into a sun parlour, out of sight of the lounge, were placed a writing-desk, a swing bookcase — a pleasant nook for writing letters or reading undisturbed.

No sooner had Jack turned the corner of the recess than she perceived the missing bag on the desk. As she snatched it up, her ear caught an unmistakable sound outside the window, the crunch of wheels on gravel. She glanced through the side casement, but discovered that the projecting end of the house cut off the porch from view. Then she heard a bell clang. Heavens, was her instant thought, visitors! Gathering her flimsy wrap about her, she sped light-footed for the lounge. But before she could emerge from the recess, Michel hove in sight from the end of the hall and crossed to the front door.

The girl made a little grimace as she drew back in the shelter of the curtains, looped against the wall on either side of the recess. Properly caught! Cautiously she slid a finger between curtain and wall and peeped through the chink. A small, brown-faced woman, very neat in a dust-coloured walking-suit, came into the hall, Michel behind her. American, the great Victor's late assistant expertly diagnosed.

The man offered a chair, but the visitor declined it, and he hurried away. Jack was wondering whether she should not come out, and, apologizing for the kimono, escape upstairs, when Ribeira's voice sounded close at hand. 'Mrs. Bronstein, yes?' Jack heard him say softly.

Now Jack's field of view from behind the curtain was restricted. It embraced in actual fact only the space between recess and door, where the brown-faced woman stood idly examining the room as most visitors in such circumstances will do. Jack could not see Ribeira, but against that she had a very clear sight of his visitor, and what the girl perceived of the effect of Ribeira's appearance upon the lady sufficed to put out of Jack's mind any thought of disclosing herself.

For at the sound of Ribeira's voice, the brown-faced woman swung about sharply and seemed to stiffen as she cried shrilly without warning or any sort of preamble: 'You poor sap, you can't blackmail me! And don't suppose, because I've come out here after you, that I'm falling for any of your cheap threats!'

The accent was strongly American, the tone inexpressibly crude, blustering, and vulgar. It dawned upon Jack that this woman, so faultlessly neat, so impassive of feature, was boiling with anger.

Ribeira's rumbling laugh rang out. 'Perhaps you fell in love with my voice over the telephone?' he said. He stepped into Jack's field of view, cigar in mouth, hands behind his back, sneering, self-assured.

In deadly calm the woman faced him. 'You can cut out the wise-cracks,' she rasped. 'This is business. I wired you to Cannes to come to Paris to see me. You come to Paris, but instead of calling round yourself, you send me a letter with what you call your terms. Why?'

Ribeira shrugged his shoulders. 'That, perhaps, is my affair.'

'I told you to bring the girl with you. Where is she?'

At that Jack grew suddenly vigilant. The girl? Who could that be other than she? She applied her eye to the chink again.

'That, too,' Ribeira retorted, 'is my affair.'

With a swift movement the woman laid aside the neat satchel she carried and, with a menacing air, advanced a pace towards the man. Cynical, provocative, he awaited her. 'Listen, Big Boy,' she said, icily imperturbable as ever, 'I sent for you to tell you my terms, not to hear yours. When you telephoned me last night and said you'd give me until this evening to accept your proposal, I told you to go to hell, didn't I?'

Ribeira removed his cigar from his lips and nonchalantly shook the ash into the saucer of a pot of hyacinths. 'You talk big, Mrs. Bronstein,' he remarked. 'But two hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money to part with.' He replaced his cigar between his lips with a flourish.

The woman's face flamed with anger. 'Part with nothing,' she repeated scornfully. 'See here, Ribeira, I'm fair, I am. I like to give every one a chance. And I'm here to let you know exactly why I called your bluff.'

Ribeira laughed. 'What does the proverb say? "The night brings counsel": I fancied you'd think better of my offer to-day.'

At that moment there came an interruption. The front doorbell clanged. A puzzled expression crept into Ribeira's eyes. He made a sign to his visitor not to move and went to the door, passing out of Jack's line of vision. An instant late she heard him shout something angrily, the door was slammed, and he was back in the lounge, confronting Mrs. Bronstein once more. Again the bell clanged, and yet again. But he ignored it.

'And so, my dear Mrs. Bronstein,' he said smoothly, when the clamour had finally died away, 'you have discovered that second thoughts are best, hein?'

'You big fool,' she blazed at him in sudden exasperation, 'will you get this? I'm not running after you. I've come out here to warn you...'

He made her a mocking bow. 'To warn me? So! Madame is too kind. Of what, may I ask?'

'Two guys crashed my suite at the hotel this morning, snooping after you...'

'After me?' The tone was strongly incredulous.

'That's what I said, didn't I?'

'But no one knows we have been in correspondence.'

'These guys do. They know you wired me from Cannes, anyway. And they want to know where you are.'

'You didn't tell them?'

Mrs. Bronstein indulged in a mirthless cackle. 'Can you tie that?' she remarked impersonally. 'No, sir,' she added with emphasis, 'I told them nothing.'

Ribeira shot her a wary glance. 'Did they perhaps give their names?'

'Sure.' Her accents were very cheerful. 'Nolan was one. The other was Royds or Reiss, some name like that...'

Behind the curtain Jack's breath came fast. If the conversation up to that point had mystified her, now she was more perplexed than ever. What did Harvey Nolan and Oliver Royce want with Ribeira? And why had they followed him to Paris?

Ribeira had taken his cigar out of his mouth and was contemplating it absently. 'So?' he murmured, as though speaking to himself. With a brusque gesture he pitched the stub into the hearth.

Mrs. Bronstein was speaking again. 'Our understanding was absolute secrecy, wasn't it?' she said. 'And you've broken it...'

'I give you my word of honour...' Ribeira began.

Once more Mrs. Bronstein gave vent to her dry cackle. 'I wouldn't rob you. Now, listen, Handsome,' she went on briskly, 'I'm having nothing further to do with you. Once folks start up being nosey about you and me, I stand from under. Just get this, will you? And get it quick, because this is my busy day and I've a dinner engagement in Paris. I don't have to pay you a darn cent and I'm not frightened of your threats. Wait...' She raised a commanding hand, for Ribeira showed signs of bursting forth into angry speech. '*But*... just to get rid of you and so's you won't get sore, I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'll pay you ten thousand dollars for that letter of Vincent Cranston's and...'

Ribeira walked to the fireplace and rang the bell. 'In that case, madame,' he interrupted her, 'I wish you good-afternoon. You'll hear from the girl's lawyers.'

The woman bristled. 'And in that case,' she retorted very distinctly and deliberately, 'you'll hear from the French police!'

Behind the curtain, Jack closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall. Her brain was racing madly. Much of the talk she had listened to was obscure, but on certain points her faculties, sharpened by her growing excitement, had fastened. There was this secret deal or understanding, or whatever you called it, between Ribeira and this mysterious Mrs. Bronstein, of which she, Jack, was the subject; there was a sum of two hundred thousand dollars somehow involved; and lastly, and most important of all, there was this letter of Vincent Cranston's, which, she made no doubt, was *her* letter, poor Célie's letter, signed by the enigmatic 'Vin,' which, as she remembered now with a sudden pang, she had never claimed back from Ribeira.

Her mind was unable to fit all these facts together. But it leapt instantly to one inescapable, staggering conclusion. Ribeira's pretended kindness towards her was a sham. He had got hold of her with an object, and she was here alone with him, in this remote country house, and was no doubt intended to remain in his power until that object was achieved. If he had overawed her before, the very thought of him terrified her now that behind this mask of jovial bonhomie she discerned the workings of a deep and relentless brain.

His strident voice, hoarse with passion, suddenly ringing through the quiet room, seemed to send its vibrations into her very heart. She was sick with fright. But once more she drew the curtain aside and looked out upon the two that faced one another beside the oaken refectory table of the lounge.

Ribeira's heavy face was mottled with anger. There was foam on the bearded lips. Jack's mind groped backwards. What had the woman said? Oh, yes, she had threatened him with the police. That, too? Jack had forgotten that.

'You'd dare to threaten me, you...?' His voice rose to a shriek: his fury seemed to choke him.

'You bet your life,' the woman answered coolly and briskly. 'When a gink comes blackmailing Hetty Bronstein, she takes her little precautions. I've got *you* fixed, Brother.' She lowered her voice and beckoned him nearer with an imperious motion of the head. Then her tone changed: 'I don't know if your servant understands English,' she remarked, 'and if, in that case, you'd like to have him hear what I've got to say...'

Jack divined that, out of her sight, Michel had appeared in answer to the bell.

Ribeira rapped out a phrase in French between his clenched teeth. A door slammed.

Mrs. Bronstein laughed lightly. 'I'll teach you a whole lot more sense before I'm through with you, Ribeira,' she observed chattily. 'Where was I? Oh, yes.

When my son-in-law died, I found a very interesting letter on going through his papers, an old letter from Paris...'

She made a significant pause. Ribeira was wiping his lips with his handkerchief. 'Well?' he prompted gruffly.

'A blackmailing letter, Ribeira,' the woman resumed. 'It had a lot of stuff about a secret marriage with a Frenchwoman and about a baby, a baby girl. But I guess that don't interest you any, huh?'

'Don't ask me questions,' Ribeira grunted. 'If you've anything to say, say it...'

'Sure, sure. Here's a funny thing. Just the other day a similar letter arrived, addressed to my son-in-law — the writer hadn't heard about the accident, I'll say — from Cannes this time. I compared the handwriting with the writing of that old letter from Paris. It was the same, though the signature was different. What d'you know about that?'

But this time the man remained silent. He was immobile, his face behind its glasses a blank mask.

'The same old hand, but a different name,' she declared gaily. She paused. 'Some of us,' she went on with careful deliberation, 'change a whole lot in eighteen years. Even to our names, eh, Henri?'

Still Ribeira made no sign; he was like a statue standing there.

'I wonder,' said Mrs. Bronstein, 'what you were doing with yourself from 1910 to 1922!'

At last she had struck home. A muffled cry broke from him, and one hand went out in a convulsive gesture as if he were about to advance on her and strike her.

But she held him with her cold black eye and he remained rooted to the spot. 'You poor fool,' she exclaimed with withering scorn, 'd'you think we've got no enquiry agents in New York, no back files of French newspapers? And *you'd* hold *me* up for hush-money, would you, you big slob? D'you really think I don't know what's waiting for you right here in France?'

She broke off and silence dropped upon the room like a fog. Little by little the last vestige of colour had drained out of Ribeira's flabby cheeks. His rigidity was frightful. He stood there as seemingly lifeless as a waxen image, and with a face as unwholesomely white.

'Now do you understand who's giving this party?' Once more the hard American voice fended the stillness. 'I've told you my terms. You shall have ten grand, and it's up to you to see that the girl never comes forward with a claim. Because the day she does, I go to the police. Whatever you decide to do, you'd better do quickly. I sail the day after to-morrow and I'm taking that letter with me. If it's not in my hands by noon to-morrow...'

Ribeira spoke hoarsely. 'Give me the money. You can have the letter now...'

Mrs. Bronstein shook her head. 'I didn't bring that much with me. I'm taking no chances when I go calling on a party who's as quick on the draw as you are.' She gurgled softly at her pleasantry. 'Come to the hotel at noon to-morrow; I'll step around to the bank in the morning and draw the money for you. I'll get my lawyer along and we'll fix everything right.' She began to draw on her gloves. 'Is that your machine out there on the drive?'

'Yes.'

'How about you driving me back to Paris? I sent my cab away. That old train just shook me to bits.'

Ribeira made a non-committal gesture. 'If you feel yourself safe with me...'

'Speed don't scare me any...' she began, then broke off to laugh. 'Gee, I'm the dumb one. I get you. Why, Mr. Ribeira, you surely don't think I'd take a risk like that? Before coming out here this afternoon, I sent a letter round to my lawyer which he's to take to the police if I'm not back in the hotel by midnight.'

Ribeira inclined himself gravely. 'Madame,' he said, 'you have a great brain.'

'Not so great,' she retorted. 'But I use what I've got, that's all!'

He opened the front door for her and they passed out together.

CHAPTER XXXIV

AT LES CHARMETTES

As in a dream Jack heard the car depart. Silence fell once more, disturbed only by a pounding noise in her ears; it seemed quite a while that she listened to it before she realized that it was the beating of her heart.

She stirred and pressed her fingers against her temples. Her hands were icy. An insistent impulse fretted at her brain. As if in answer to its prompting she glanced down at her attire — the foolish, gay kimono, the little blue mules. Leave the house, yes; but first she would have to change back into her frock.

She peered round the curtain. The lounge wore the expectant air of an inhabited place that has been temporarily abandoned. There were vague little rustles and creaks as though chairs and tables, free from human restraint, were whispering together. She wondered what had become of Michel. He was somewhere in the house, she knew; she would have to risk that. Folding her wrapper about her and clutching her bag, she slipped out and darted across the hall to the staircase. As she mounted the stairs, she heard a creaking sound behind her. In terror she flung a glance over her shoulder. All was still and undisturbed. A second later she was back in her room with the door locked.

She flung off her wrap, whipped her dress over her head, kicked off her slippers, tugged on her shoes. Kimono and slippers, together with sundry toilet accessories she had already unpacked, she bundled into her suitcase and snapped the locks. Her trunk she would abandon; at that moment the eventual loss of her trousseau gave her no qualms. Her sole impulse, driving her frantic like the fiery dart which the bull-fighter uses to madden the bull, was to get away from that house and the horror it had revealed to her.

She crammed her small hat over her shining hair, scrambled into her overcoat, then, suitcase in hand, unfastened the door. She ran across the landing, down the stairs. But before she had reached the bottom step, a door at the foot of the staircase — it was the red baize service door that led through to the kitchen and the rear premises of the house — unexpectedly swung back and disclosed Michel.

She faltered, dumbfounded, upbraiding herself; of course, the suitcase gave the whole show away. If she had left it behind, she could have pretended she was merely going out for a stroll round the grounds.

Michel said in a toneless voice: 'Mademoiselle is leaving us?'

Denial, she recognized, was useless. 'Yes, Michel,' she replied. 'I'll... I'll write to monsieur. Will you tell him?'

She took a step forward and found that the man, lounging towards her, blocked the way. He put his hand on the suitcase. 'Mademoiselle will permit me?'

Her heart bounded. He raised no objection, then; it was going to be all right. She relinquished the case. He took it from her, kicked the door behind him open with his foot and swung the bag inside. The door rebounded. Wiping his hands on the sacking apron he wore hitched about his dirty suit, he said slowly: 'Mademoiselle had better wait until monsieur returns.'

She laughed nervously. 'Oh, but I can't do that...'

He repeated dully: 'Mademoiselle had better wait...'

'But I wish to go now,' she protested. She held out her hand. 'Please give me that suitcase.'

He shook his head.

'Give it to me at once!'

He laughed and showed a row of broken teeth. 'Nothing doing, my little one!'

At that, with a brusque movement, she essayed to brush past him. But instantly his arm, massive and enormously long, swung across, the touch of it against her chest was like a bar of iron. 'You can't go out,' he told her. 'The patron's orders!'

'What nonsense!' she exclaimed indignantly. 'I shall go out if I want to!'

He shook his head again, a cunning smile spreading over the repulsive features. 'Not if the patron says you can't!' He advanced a grubby hand and pinched her chin. 'Nothing to worry about, la gonzesse!' he said in the drawling sing-song of the Paris gutter speech.

Without an instant's thought she drew back and struck him across the face with her open palm. Her upbringing in the streets came to her aid as she bade him, in the same ripe vocabulary he had used, to keep his filthy paws to himself. He received the blow unflinchingly and with an impudent grin. But his eyes, small and deep-set, were malignant, as, with a gesture of the head, he curtly told her to return to her room. So saying, he set his foot on the lowest step of the staircase. As she saw him coming at her, with his little pig eyes spitefully staring out of his white, pudgy face, his bent and flattened nose that stamped his whole expression with a look unutterably sinister, and his hard, cynical mouth, she retreated before him. Thus, step by step, he drove her up the flight until, on the landing, she turned and fled from him to lock herself once more in her room.

She did not cry; she was too frightened to indulge in tears. The very excess of fear seemed to render her clear-headed, and she sat down on the bed to face the situation before her. She was in the hands of this man who had murdered her mother and Morrisot, in the power of this Laurent, blackmailer and escaped convict. She was sufficiently well-informed to know what the ghastly rigour of the French penal settlements does to the criminals relegated to the hell on earth, and that of these only the most determined and most daring ever succeed in escaping. Yet Laurent had not hesitated to risk his liberty, gained, Heaven knew, at what sacrifice, and return to France to avenge himself on the woman who had betrayed him. Knowing what she knew, realizing now the adamant temper of his resolution, it seemed to her that she must die of terror if she had to face him again. She must get out of this house, anyhow, at any cost, before he came back...'

The thought sent her flying to the window. But as she leaned over the sill, measuring with her eye the drop to the ground, a laugh rang out from below. Michel sauntered by, smoking a cigarette. He halted beneath her and, holding out his massive arms, cried mockingly: 'Shall I catch you, my pretty?'

She shut the window and went swiftly to the door. If he were in the garden, she might find a way out on the other side of the house. The front door was locked, no doubt; but there might be a downstairs window... When she undid her bedroom door, however, it resisted her; it had been bolted on the outside.

She was locked in.

The discovery drove her frantic for a while. She sat on the bed, plucking at her handkerchief and letting her eyes rove incessantly, hopelessly, round the walls. What was going to become of her? Ribeira was to sell her letter for ten thousand dollars. Well, he was welcome to the money, if only he would let her go! Why was he detaining her? Stark terror laid a chill finger on her heart. He would not shrink from murder, she knew that...

The slow spring twilight began. She told herself she must be brave; people nowadays were not murdered so easily. To regain her self-control, she began to pace the room, letting her mind run back over the conversation she had overheard. Suddenly, she stopped dead, a light of hope in her face. Harvey Nolan and Oliver Royce, she had forgotten about them! Was it possible that they had discovered something about Ribeira? If they had, then it could only be to warn her that they had pursued him to Paris. Clearly, they knew of his connection with Mrs. Bronstein; from what the woman had said, their interview with her could not have been exactly friendly.

Overcome with the force of this discovery, she sank down on the bed again. By this it was almost dark and, feeling chilly, she crept in under the eiderdown. Only the idea, mere surmise though it were, that she was not utterly alone in her plight, that some one was hastening to her aid, solaced her. Oliver, if only she might see him again, with his slightly patronizing air, his imperturbable English manner, his clean, normal look! How petty their differences seemed by contrast with the frightful peril of her situation! She believed him fond of her: his stupid jealousy showed that.

But would she ever see him again? Would he find her?

Mrs. Bronstein had suggested that she had thrown him and Harvey Nolan off the scent. But only for the moment, surely: they would not be discomfited so easily. Englishmen stuck to things, like Morrisot going for Laurent unarmed — the recollection seared like a naked flame: she had not meant to think of that again! Americans, too, were tenacious. They knew what they wanted and went for it: Harvey Nolan would not be easily put off. It was comforting to lie there under the warm quilt and picture them hurrying to her assistance.

But always her mind came back to her desperate plight. She caught herself listening to the patter of her wrist-watch in the gathering gloom. Ribeira was returning: every tick of the clock brought him nearer. And then what? She was so lonely and help seemed so utterly remote. A tear rolled down her cheek. She flung herself upon her pillow and sobbed without restraint. Presently, with the tears wet on her face, she fell asleep.

A rapping at the door startled her into instant wakefulness. The room was quite dark. She raised herself on her elbow and switched on the light, her heart hammering wildly. The hands of her watch stood at half-past seven. She heard Ribeira's voice outside: 'Jack, Jack, are you asleep? It is I, Neque!'

Now that the moment had arrived, it found her cool and collected. She must keep her wits about her; it was her only chance. Before all things else, she must not let him perceive that her manner towards him was different. Let him only suspect that she knew his secret and her last hope was gone.

He called out again: 'But, Jack, my little one, will you answer me?'

Strange, how that familiar voice tranquillized her! It is only of the Unknown that man is afraid. This was Neque, rattling good-humouredly at her door, as he had so often done at Cannes, to tell her to hurry up, that they were waiting for her. It was hard to remember that he was a desperate criminal, his hands trebly stained with blood.

She answered quite naturally: 'I've been asleep. What is it?'

'Come down. Dinner will be ready presently...'

'I shan't be a minute!' She heard his ponderous tread go down the stairs.

She washed her face in the basin, touched up her lips, powdered herself, tidied her hair. Then, noticing how wan her face appeared in the mirror, she rubbed a little red into her cheeks. She must look normal, she must act normally; he must remark no change in her. Her heart sank as she faced the door, ready to descend. But she left herself no time for hesitation; she went forward boldly and unlocked the door.

The centre light was on in the lounge, and beneath it Ribeira sat at the table, a glass of beer before him. A newspaper was in his hands, but he was not reading it; it had fallen on his knees and he was staring morosely into space.

At the sound of her step on the stair, he turned his head sharply, then laid aside his newspaper and stood up. As he faced her, his glasses glittering in the light, she was conscious of mentally noting how the thick lenses obscured the expression of the eyes. As she crossed the hall to where he awaited her coming, she was searching her memory for that brief glimpse she had caught of Henri Laurent on the night of the murders. The picture came and went — a spare man with a wasted face and staring, haunted eyes, in a black overcoat with the collar turned up and a black hat crammed down over his brows. She could find no resemblance between him and this pudgy, bearded figure, or even imagine a resemblance behind the mask of that vacuous, spectacled regard, that bristling thatch of hair.

'So, my little Jack,' he said as she approached, 'Michel tells me you want to leave us.'

'I fear the good Michel was a little tactless,' he went on suavely. 'An excellent fellow, who has served me before when I have been in France. But he has the mental processes of, what shall we say? — an orang-outang. From what he says, I gather that he forcibly prevented you from going. Is that so?'

'Yes,' she said, and left it at that.

He clicked gently with his tongue. 'I must apologize, my dear. He completely misunderstood my instructions. I merely asked him to tell you not to go out, as I did not expect to be away long, and I wished to discuss the arrangements of the house with you on my return. But let me get this right. Do you really want to leave?'

His voice was deferential, caressing, almost, his manner benign. The lounge was cosy under the electric light and from the direction of the kitchen floated pleasant domestic sounds, the running of a tap, the sizzling of a pan on the fire. Outside was darkness, the Unknown. She knew that he was lying, that Michel had detained her by his order; yet, now that it had come to the test, she was reluctant to take the plunge, throw up her job and once more face the future alone. She had to brace herself to be firm as she answered: 'Yes, I do.'

'Why?' His tone was mildly reproachful.

She had thought out her explanation in anticipation of the question. 'You'll probably think me very silly,' she said rather nervously, 'but, frankly, I didn't expect to be here alone with you. Of course,' she added hastily, 'I know it's all right. But people talk, don't they? So if you don't mind, I should prefer to go to an hotel.'

'To-night?' he queried sharply. 'You want to go to-night?'

'I think it would be best...'

'Well, well,' he remarked, 'we'll talk it over at dinner...'

He sighed and, taking off his spectacles, drew his fingers down over his eyeballs. It was a familiar trick of his when tired; Jack had seen him do it a dozen times.

'Perhaps when you've had something to eat,' he went on and smiled at her, 'you'll be persuaded to revise your decision.'

His eyes, bereft of their baffling disguise, looked into hers. It occurred to her then that, throughout their brief acquaintance, she had never troubled herself to study his physical traits; she had taken him for granted merely as a jolly old thing with a beard, and had not so much as found out the colour of his eyes. Gazing into them now, she saw two jet-black pin-points with a wide surrounding iris, bold eyes, resolute eyes, close-set and crafty, with a hint of ferocity lurking in their depths.

She scrutinized the mouth obscured by the abundant beard. The lips were razor-thin, disclosing at moments an upper row of white, firm teeth. A chord stirred faintly in her memory. Gross living would serve to fill out that spare form wasted by the starvation diet, the fevers, of Guiana; the ample paunch, the spreading beard, would foreshorten the whole figure; that thatch of hair on the face would blur the cast of the features. But the eyes had not changed.

Her mind was made up now. She would not stay another instant. But she must not be too eager, or seem scared. If only her heart did not thump so! With a supreme effort she steadied herself, paused, then said with an assumption of carelessness: 'I was only thinking, Neque. Do you know, I believe I won't wait for dinner. It'll make me so late getting to Paris. I'd rather go at once.'

She was watching him as she spoke; he'll have to disclose his hand now, was her thought. To her amazement he shrugged his shoulders and replied rather huffily: 'Well, go if you must. Michel can drive you to the station. But you'd better start at once because I'm hungry and I want my dinner. Are your things ready?'

She had only to put on her hat, she told him.

'Then do so at once,' he bade her. 'I'll go and start up the car and Michel will get your trunk down...'

'I don't want to delay your dinner,' she put in. 'We could telephone for a cab, couldn't we?'

'Nonsense,' he retorted, 'Michel can run you down.' He walked briskly across the lounge and vanished through the service door while Jack ran upstairs.

As she adjusted her hat before the glass, she reflected with some satisfaction that he had not asked her about her plans. If he did so, she would put him off with some non-committal answer. She would have liked to get back the papers she had entrusted to him; but she did not dare demand them for fear of arousing his suspicions. In the back of her mind was the uneasy feeling that, once clear of the house, she would have to decide what to do about the information which had come into her possession. She would have to go to the police, of course; she could have a talk with Inspector Dufour if he were still at the Sûreté.

As Michel did not appear to fetch her trunk, she went downstairs. There was no one in the lounge, but from somewhere not far off she heard the faint throb of a car. She sat down and began to draw on her gloves. Now that she was going, she tried to put this man from her mind and concentrate on her plans. She knew of a quiet hotel off the Avénue de l'Opéra where some of Victor's foreign buyers used to stay; she would get a room there, for the night at any rate.

The service door flapped open. Ribeira emerged, walking softly, his head raised in a listening attitude towards the top of the staircase where her room was situated. His bearing was furtive and for the moment she felt disquieted.

Then he caught sight of her. 'Ah, there you are!' he cried briskly. He bent forward, stooping, and produced her suitcase from behind the door. 'This is yours, isn't it? Come on, the car's at the back...'

'There's my trunk to come down yet,' she pointed out.

'I've told Michel,' he reassured her. 'This way...'

He went before her through the baize door and down a corridor, where presently he halted and, standing back, ushered her into a short passage with a door at the end. Beyond the door was a faint glow, as of a dim light, and the throbbing of the car she had already heard.

The door was ajar and, pushing it open, she saw the car which had brought her from Paris and, in the yellow glimmer of its side-lamps, the bare interior of a spacious garage. The ruby tail-light of the limousine, trembling to the pant of the exhaust, gave her a cheerful feeling. A few minutes more and she would be safe.

She went into the garage.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE CLUE

IN ASSURING Fitchie that he was not scared of Ribeira, Oliver Royce spoke no more than the truth. On parting from her at Rotival Station, his sole idea was to confront Ribeira with all possible speed, and force him to disclose Jack's whereabouts. With this intention uppermost in his mind, he turned the car and drove swiftly down the village street by the way he had come, headed for the river.

Evening had fallen, bringing with it a spatter of rain that blurred the wind-screen. Beneath the trees on the river road it was dusk and dark and lonely, and under the influence of his surroundings, the boy's first impulse gradually cooled. He realized that, before tackling Ribeira, he must have some plan of campaign. Lifting his foot from the accelerator, he let the car slow down and finally drew up at the roadside. Here he switched off the engine and, lighting a cigarette, set himself to review the whole situation.

Link by link, the chain of evidence against Ribeira was accumulating. Criminals, he knew, were consistent in following their particular bent, and here was Ribeira appearing before Mousie Hersent in Laurent's old rôle of blackmailer. Undoubtedly, Ribeira had laid his plans to get Jack into his power in order to exploit her legal right to Vincent Cranston's money in some way to his own advantage. But Ribeira's motives — or, indeed, the man himself — were of little account beside the paramount importance of bringing Jack into safety. With Ribeira they could deal later: the first thing to do was to find *her.*

Sadly, under the low, black clouds the unseen river gurgled; the wind hissed in the reeds. The road was unlit, deserted; the rare houses were black and forbidding. As he sat in the dim radiance of the dash-light, with the rain pattering upon the hood, a nameless fear seized upon the boy.

Fitchie was positive that Jack was not at Les Charmettes; but she was speaking of half-past three and the hour was now after eight. Plenty of time for the girl to have been brought there, if she had not been at the house all the while. That Ribeira had not mentioned her was no proof. The topic was a sore one with Mousie anyway; besides, the fellow was shunning publicity — his ruthless ejection of Mousie to secure this remote house for his own purposes showed that. 'Ten to one,' Oliver said to himself, 'if I barge in by the front door, Ribeira will deny all knowledge of her, and where shall we be then?'

Should he go back to Rotival and telephone Harvey to pick him up so that they might tackle Ribeira together? Though aware that this would be the wiser course, he rejected it. To find a telephone, to wait for the call, perhaps only to learn that Harvey was out, or eventually to hang about until Harvey came, knowing that every endless minute of the time Jack was somewhere in the darkness beyond those dripping trees in the power of this murderous gaol-bird — no, he couldn't face it! Besides, if she were in danger, he wanted to be the one to claim her thanks, to show her that a parasite, a gigolo — he smiled bitterly — might be of use, after all. He had salved his conscience as far as Harvey was concerned; he knew that Fitchie would not fail him.

He saw things more clearly now. He would have to root round a bit, try and discover if Jack were actually in the place, before confronting Ribeira. Why the devil hadn't he thought of asking Fitchie to tell him the geography of the house? He must get rid of the car, park it somewhere out of sight, and go up to the house on foot. He pitched his cigarette away and pressed the starter.

On reaching the side turning of which Fitchie had spoken, he got out and surveyed it. Seeing it both narrow and winding, he suspected there might be difficulty about turning. So he switched on the head-lamps and, by their glare, examined the road ahead. It meandered off into a mere cart-track, but a hundred yards or so along it, he descried the black outline of a shed. Thither he drove and left the car, with lights extinguished, in its lee. Twenty paces away the big Renault was invisible. Then he hurried along the track to the side-road.

It was when he reached the gates of Les Charmettes, looming high and massive out of the obscurity, that he realized how ill-equipped he was to play the part of modern knight errant. In books cavaliers in his situation invariably were in possession of an electric torch, a revolver, and other indispensable accessories of the gentle art of house-breaking. But he had nothing of the sort: no light other than a box of matches, and in the way of lethal weapons, not even a pocket-knife.

The white gates enabled him in the darkness to locate the entrance. But when they resisted his push, he had to scratch a match to determine the cause. He then discovered that the two wings were fastened together with a chain which, in turn, was secured with a padlock. With a growing sense of uneasiness he perceived, at the cost of another match, that both chain and padlock were brandnew. The new tenant of Les Charmettes, it was evident, had no use for unexpected callers.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he made out that the iron uprights of the gates were prolonged in a curved frieze which made it impossible to scale them. The wall on either side was similarly spiked and ran its course beyond, to left and right, smooth of face and lofty, and garnished, as to the parapet, with an abundance of jagged glass points. There was no bell or any sign of a lodge. Oliver swore softly. He would have to follow the wall round in the dark on the chance of finding a place where he could get over.

The rain was falling faster now. Turning up his coat-collar, he set off up the road, the wall looming dimly beside him. A little, and the wall ran away at right angles, traversing a field of naked ploughland. In his haste he flopped into a ditch as he left the road and found himself up to his knees in water, and then, as he scrambled out, faced by a bramble hedge, through which, painfully, he forced a passage. In the field the going was terrible; every step the wet clay balled itself on his shoes. The night was inky black, and he kept his direction only by means of the towering mass of the wall. He followed it where it turned again, always amid those cruel furrows, until suddenly he was brought up short by colliding violently with an obstacle.

The field ended in a hedge, in which was set the gate into which he had blundered. The post on which it swung, he noticed, was planted against the wall. Drenched with rain and dripping with perspiration, the boy halted, bowed over the topmost bar to get his breath. Presently, as he straightened up, he observed high above his head, faintly silhouetted against the night sky, the solid arm of a tree projecting beyond the wall from the other side. He looked at the gatepost and he looked again at the branch. By standing on the post and jumping, he calculated he should be able to catch the bough and swing himself onto the top of the wall. But he must not miss his grasp or he would cut his hands to ribbons on that cruel glass.

He would have to risk that. He had no more time to waste. The luminous dial of his watch showed it to be five minutes to nine — he had been three quarters of an hour floundering about in the dark. He buttoned up his jacket and mounted the post. The branch was nearer than he thought: it was just clear of his finger-tips when his arms were stretched to their fullest extent.

He crouched down, then sprang upward. His grasp was firm on the branch — he had done it. He felt the bough sway and bounce beneath his weight; his feet, dangling, brushed the barbs of that terrible *chevaux de frise.* Shifting his grip hand over hand, he shuffled forward along the branch, at the same time swinging his legs upward so as to clear the parapet. At that moment he heard a sharp crack, the bough gave way and amid a clatter of twigs he tumbled headlong down.

He landed with a thump on a dank carpet of leaves. He was breathless and shaken, but otherwise unharmed. 'I came down on the right side of the wall, anyway,' he reflected cheerfully. Here in the park it was lighter, and at a little distance he made out the curve of a drive winding like a grey serpent through the gloom. In an instant he was on his feet running swiftly between the trees.

A light shone through the foliage. It guided him to the house. Where the avenue ended in a gravelled sweep before the front door, he halted behind an elm to reconnoitre. The light he had followed was set in the fanlight above the door. It was the only sign of life. Apart from this lone beacon, the house was dark and silent, every window black.

Oliver felt his spirits sink. At nine o'clock they could not have gone to bed. Had he reached his goal too late? He stood stock-still and strained his ears for any sound of movement, of a human voice. Now he became aware of a quiet rhythmic drumming which he immediately recognized as the beat of a motor, an electric-light engine, he surmised, or a pumping plant. He traced the sound to a long, squat shed, with double doors like a garage, which projected at an angle from a wing of outhouses running out on the far side of the front door. If the engine were running, he told himself, the house must still be occupied.

Moving from tree to tree he gained the side of the house. This was dark like the rest, but he seemed to descry a glow somewhere at the back. As he groped his way along, the wet foliage of a hedge brushed his fingers and he discerned the dim outline of a pergola beyond. A slight flapping sound, as of a blind or curtain buffeted by the breeze, arrested his attention as he crept forward. It suggested to him that a window on the ground floor had been left open, and he noted the fact for future use.

Now the hedge ended and his feet gritted on a path winding between laurel clumps. He checked, listening. The glow he had remarked was just ahead of him. Here it was certainly brighter, and he fancied he distinguished the murmur of voices. Advancing cautiously, in ten paces or so he found himself looking into a small flagged courtyard streaming with light from a window.

The voices were now quite distinct. He heard a laugh, a man's laugh, and then a droning murmur in another key as though some one were telling a story. A footstep rang hollow on a boarded floor, there was a muttered exclamation, and a voice cried out in French: 'Don't drown it, nom d'un chien!'

Gingerly, on tiptoe, Oliver went forward. The speakers, it was clear, were inside the house, probably in a room with the window open. He came to a gate, slipped through it, keeping in the shadow, and found himself gazing through a lighted window.

Ribeira and another man, whose back was to the court, were at a table in a small, bright kitchen. There was a bottle and glasses between them and the other man, who was standing, was filling up the glasses from a steaming jug. Ribeira, with his collar and vest unfastened, was laughing uproariously. He raised his smoking glass and took a deep draught. 'Peste, that warms a man!' he ejaculated, brushing his bearded lips with the back of his hand.

His companion sat down. His face was in profile. Broken nose, bulbous lips — a nice specimen, indeed, thought Oliver, recalling Fitchie's description of Ribeira's servant. The man resumed the tale which he had obviously broken off to fetch hot water from the stove.

'You must have known this screw, mon vieux, a Corsican like most of the screws on Royale — Grossetti, his name was. I says to him, I says...'

Ribeira interrupted the narrative. 'Wait. How goes the time?'

His companion glanced at his watch. 'Ten past nine...'

'We'll give it a quarter of an hour more. Well, go on about Grossetti...'

Silently Oliver drew back. He had a quarter of an hour, anyway, for what he had to do. His impression was that both men were slightly fuddled; they would be loath to leave the warm kitchen and their grog till the last minute. He was thinking of that open window...'

He came upon it in the rose-garden, one of the wings of a bow-window built out from the house. It proved to be a French window and it stood ajar, propped open on its arm, its silk curtain shuddering in the gusts of rain that tossed the bushes outside.

Very quietly he raised the arm and slipped into the house. No light, no sound within. He waited, listening. Out of a profound silence the faint throbbing he had heard before now vibrated upon his ear. He lit a match and saw a desk, a chair, a sport gallery, hung with pictures, opening between curtains into what seemed to be a larger apartment beyond.

As his match burned out, he snatched a glimpse of something white lying on the carpet. He struck another match and picked up the object. It was a girl's handkerchief. Then his eye fell upon a candle used for sealing on the desk. Flinging caution to the winds, he lit it and by its feeble ray examined the little scrap of cambric.

One corner bore the initial 'J.'

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE SECRET OF THE GARAGE

HER handkerchief!

Quick as thought he crushed the candle out with his flat hand. She was in the house, then; at least, she had been there. He pressed the morsel of linen to his lips. The freshness of lavender lingered upon it. The very faint fragrance moved him strongly. It seemed so much a part of Jack. As he stood there in the dark, he had an odd feeling that she was by his side.

'We'll give it a quarter of an hour more,' Ribeira had said. What had he meant? For what were these two waiting, hobnobbing over their toddy by the kitchen fire? Well, one thing, at least, was clear, Oliver reflected. He had a quarter of an hour, fifteen minutes, in which to search the house.

He thrust the handkerchief in his pocket and advanced, tapping his way along the gallery. His fingers touched a light switch, but he would not risk turning up the light. So it was by the wavering flame of a match that he glanced swiftly round the long, low room into which the gallery conducted.

The remains of a meal on the table, a red baize door which, suggesting the entrance to the domestic offices, reminded him with unpleasant vividness of the two drinking in the kitchen, a broad staircase — these were the salient points his eye took in ere the flame died. Already his matches rattled with a hollow sound in their box and he realized he should have to husband his stock. It was in the dark, therefore, that, having memorized a clear path, he sought the stairs.

With his ears straining to catch any sound from below, having reached the top of the flight, he opened the first door that presented itself. The sheeted bed, like a ghostly catafalque, told him that the room was untenanted. But next door the bed was uncovered and, kindling a match, he perceived that the quilt was disarranged and that the pillow bore the clear impress of a head. With a backward glance, he softly closed the door and switched on the light.

Clearly, the room had been occupied. The bed had not been slept in, but it was obvious that some one had lain on it to rest — the eiderdown had been flung aside and one end hung down upon the floor. But drawers and cupboards were empty; if Jack had been the occupant, she had left no positive clue to her presence.

Wait! There was a fitted wash-basin, above which a mirror was affixed, with a glass shelf below. On this shelf his eye now detected a whitish patch. He ran his finger along it, scrutinized, smelt the substance. It was face powder!

His glance ran swiftly round the room. The evidence was not conclusive: Fitchie, Mousie herself, might have left the room disordered. Then he remarked on the marble mantelpiece an empty bottle and knew that he had found the corroboration he sought. From where he stood he could read the label 'Old Mitcham Lavender Water.' His fingers dipped into his pocket and brought the handkerchief he had found. Mechanically he raised it to his face, but no further confirmation was needed. Jack had used the room.

He snapped off the light and stole back to the corridor.

The discovery took him no farther. The answer to the riddle was with those two ill-favoured villains boozing in the kitchen. There was only one means of ascertaining what they were waiting for, and that was to watch them. To return to the flagged courtyard he would have to leave the house. That was out of the question — he might not be able to get back. He would have to find some observation post inside the house from which to survey their movements. He thought of that red baize door and all the unexplored territory that lay beyond.

Once more the brooding hush of the lounge, with the muffled hum of the engine weaving through it, environed him. With groping hands he moved forward, feeling along the wall for the roughness of the baize. His fumbling fingers blundered into something that rocked perilously. Damn it, it was a vase: he was at a window-sill. He would have to sacrifice another match.

The tiny flame flared in the darkness. He saw the window with the curtains drawn, an ornamental jug on the slab. The service door was before him, not ten feet away. Then the flickering light showed him a strange object spread out upon the ground at his feet.

It was a large sack. It lay on the floor at right angles to the wall, the coarse burlap grotesquely incongruous against the rich dark blue drugget. On it, loosely coiled, was a length of rope, beside it half a dozen or so heavy weights, those solid cubes of iron inscribed with numerals which are used on steel-yards.

The match burnt itself down to his fingers, leaving him in the dark. He did not strike another match. He had seen enough. The tall sack, the rope, those massive weights, and the instant, paralyzing remembrance of the swift, deep river murmuring in the rushes not a quarter of a mile away — for the moment the sense of horror that overcame him left him rigid, spellbound.

He was cold all over. The icy shiver that rippled down his back made him suddenly aware of his sopping clothes. What hellish work had been accomplished in that house? And Jack, his little Jack, what had they done with her? The tepid darkness seemed to stifle him. Out of the silence the muted tap of the motor, inescapable, insistent, mocked at his despair.

At last he roused himself. Now he was convinced that Jack was somewhere in the house. Living or dead, he would find her. Out of the recesses of the house a rumbling laugh welled up faintly. Those two in the kitchen knew! They should lead him to her, or, by God, they should tell him the truth!

Resolutely, but with infinite caution, he stepped over the sack and went through the red baize door. Noiseless on its hinges, it rebounded by him. He was in a broad corridor faintly illuminated by a window on one side. The reverberation of the engine, he immediately noticed, was much more marked and, as he went quietly forward, he discovered the cause. There was an opening off the corridor about halfway along, a narrow, dark passage, from the end of which came, regular and unhurried, the smooth thrash of a motor. He left the engine-house, as he took it to be, for future exploration. First he must locate the kitchen and try to find out what Ribeira and the other man were up to.

The drone of a voice and a rim of light under a door in front of him solved the question. He made out two or three steps descending to a pantry or some such place, a closed door, from which the light proceeded, beyond.

Oliver halted and glanced behind him. His way of retreat was highly perilous. There must be a light switch by the kitchen door. When the two men left the kitchen, they would switch it on and he would have the whole of the corridor — at least, as far as the passage to the engine-house — to traverse to get under cover. There was no help for it: he must risk it. Perhaps he could hide in the pantry; if not, at the first sign of the men moving he would have to make a silent dash along the corridor into safety.

He stole forward. The pantry, he saw at a glance, offered no protection. A tall dresser, a sink, a table — not a mouse could find shelter there. Ribeira's deep voice, thick now and stuttering, reached his ears.

'Twelve years, first and last, he did in reclusion on Joseph,' he said, 'but they couldn't break his spirit. Not Max!'

Reclusion! That was what they called solitary confinement at the penal settlements. There was a special punishment island: Oliver had read a French journalist's book about it. A harrowing book! He glided soundlessly towards the door.

The other man answered now. He spat out an oath. 'I know him.' He laughed hoarsely and swore again. 'What an actor! Do you remember at Saint-Laurent the old libéré who went round mending umbrellas? Max used to take him off. Great, it was. Tiens, how did it go?'

In a high, cracked, mournful voice, pitched in a minor key, he began to chant, rolling his *r*'s exaggeratedly:

'*Je r-r-raccommode les par-r-apluies,*
La vielle vaisselle, la por-r-celaine,
Les par-r-apluies et les ombr-r-elles,
La pluie, la pluie, la plui-e!' —

the final repetition barked out explosively on a rising note.

Ribeira cleared his throat raspingly and spat. 'Stow it, will you? Would you poison a man's drink? At first, night after night, I used to dream of the cursed place, and that old man's cry went ringing through my sleep among the other sounds of that hellish village street...'

He broke off, as it seemed to Oliver, to drink.

The other laughed. 'It's easier to remember than to forget, eh, mon vieux Henri? Max, eh? Le beau Max, they called him. I haven't thought of him for years. He was a poet, too. They say he wrote the Chanson de la Guyane. You know?'

In a deep, discordant bass he started to sing to a sad refrain:

'Il pleut, il pleut,
Dans ce triste pays, il pleut,
O France...'

'Damn it, will you dry up!' Ribeira shouted. 'You give a chap the horrors. Baste, I say!'

The song broke off short. 'What became of Max?' the singer asked.

'The sharks got him...'

A throaty chuckle resounded. 'No undertakers on Joseph, eh, Henri?'

A pause. Then the same voice said: 'It's a pity there are no sharks in the Seine, hein, mon vieux?'

It seemed to Oliver that a freezing hand were wringing his heart dry. He heard Ribeira's answer: 'The weights will do the trick.' And then came an unlooked-for interruption.

A bell suddenly shrilled out from somewhere in the house, a rhythmic pealing which violently shattered the silence of the corridor. It was the telephone. Oliver caught the sound of a surprised exclamation from the room, of a chair scraping the boards. Then on tiptoe he was fleeing through the pantry.

He was only halfway along the corridor when the kitchen door opened. He turned blindly into the passage leading to the engine-house. As he did so, the corridor he had left was flooded with light. By its reflected radiance he saw a door before him. He tried the handle; the door gave. A heavy footfall sounded in the corridor as he slipped through.

He found himself in a large raftered shed. On one side stood a limousine with the engine running; the rest of the space seemed to be clear. The atmosphere was appallingly close and thick with fumes that made his eyes smart. He stifled a cough.

Except for a wisp of greyness entering through a long, horizontal window high up in one wall, the garage was in darkness. The boy listened. The footsteps had passed. He contemplated the blurred outlines of the car. The running engine suggested a quick get-away. He strangled a cough. Pah, what filthy fumes! He would have to get some air.

He looked at the car again. What if Jack were inside? Or...? He paused, his fingers on the handle of the door. Had he arrived too late? He swung back the door and fumbled for his matchbox. There was but a single match remaining.

He mustn't muff it. He scratched the match, shielding it carefully. The light flared up, and he saw that the air about him was blue with smoke from the car's exhaust. Cupping the tiny flame in his hands, he peered inside the car. It was empty.

As he turned away, he caught sight of something white on the ground. It lay parallel with the wall, a dust-sheet, or something of the sort, strangely humped in the middle as though it covered a long, shapeless mass.

Sick with horror, he plucked the sheet away and knew that he had reached his goal. Jack lay there motionless, swathed about with rope, a napkin bound across her face.

In the same instant, the match went out.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE WOLF AT BAY

He dropped to his knees beside her. Now his fingers brushed her cheek. Thank God, it was still warm. He fumbled for the knot of the napkin, found it and whipped the cloth away.

As he raised her up in his arms, it seemed to him that she stirred. 'Jack,' he whispered, 'it's I, Oliver. Everything is all right. I'm going to take you away.'

But she only uttered a little moaning sound; she seemed to be struggling for breath. His own throat was stinging fiercely and a paroxysm of coughing shook him. Suddenly the truth flashed across his mind. Now he perceived the meaning of Ribeira's remark about 'giving it another quarter of an hour.' These carbon fumes were deadly in the long run. They had brought her here to stupefy her, quietly and without fuss, before committing her to the river. No doubt every inlet of air in the place had been stopped up.

She was still alive. If he could get her out in the air, she might revive. The garage, he remembered, opened on the front of the house; if only the double doors were not locked!

As he laid her gently down, she moaned again. Then she spoke. 'Untie me,' she gasped. 'The rope... it hurts so!'

He ran his hands along the rope. It was blind work in the dark, but at last he lit upon the knot, at the ankles. The rope was old and damp, as if it had been left out and the knot desperately tight. His fingers tore at it madly while every nerve in his body, as it seemed to him, was on the alert for any sound from the corridor. All the time Ribeira's words danced across his brain. A quarter of an hour! The time must long since be up. Any moment now they might come. He thought of that waiting sack...'

Even as the knot parted, he heard a voice in the corridor. It was the servant; he recognized the thick utterance. The man was calling to Ribeira. 'It's all serene,' Oliver heard him say. 'It was only some one who wanted madame.'

A pause. With a rapid movement Oliver unwound the rope from the girl's body. 'Can you stand, do you think?' he whispered. He lifted her up in his arms, but her head fell forward. 'Wait,' he said, and set her down again. 'I'm going to open the door!'

He sprang to the double doors. If only he had a light! Then he thought of the car. Like a flash he was at the door. His fingers groped along the dash-board. They touched a button, nothing: they moved a lever and the garage leapt into brilliant light.

The powerful dazzle-lamps showed massive bolts, both horizontal and vertical, securing the doors, and in a corner the mallet which was doubtless used for hammering them home. He observed that sacking had been stuffed along top and bottom of the doors.

Oliver set to work on the bolts, but they were stiff and he snatched up the mallet. But even as he did so, he heard a shout in the corridor without, a hurrying step, and in the same moment realized, from the unfamiliar silence that had fallen upon the garage, that it was he himself who had raised the alarm. The engine had stopped. In fumbling for the lights he must have switched off the motor.

But already that rapid footfall was clattering in the passage outside. The boy looked at Jack. She lay as he had left her, half-propped against a post, her eyes closed, breathing uneasily. He noticed a bluish tinge about her lips. His face hardened. Gripping his mallet, he crept swiftly, noiselessly, to the door.

Even as he flattened himself against the wall beside it, the door was stealthily opened. Ribeira's man stood on the threshold, a grotesque, scarcely human shape, clearly visible in the blaze of light that lit up every nook and cranny of the place. Oliver saw an owlish look of wonder slowly pass across the brutish face, saw how fear leapt into the shifty, cruel eyes as they descried the girl, ungagged and unbound, reclining as though asleep... then he brought his stout wooden hammer savagely down upon the bullet head.

A grunt, and the man had slithered to the ground, a sprawling mass. He did not move again or utter another sound. Oliver dashed at the double doors, hammering at the bolts. Of the three that held the right wing of the door in place, two flew back instantly before his flail-like blows. But for the third, a vertical bolt which had to be pulled down, he required to use his hands. He flung his mallet down.

And then, as he tugged frantically at the bolt, his back to the inner door, a voice, malignant and imperious, barked out behind him. 'Turn round, you!' it said.

He faced about, empty-handed, defenceless. He knew what he would see. Even without the pistol that caught the high-lights on its gleaming barrel, the whole attitude of the bearded figure radiated menace.

'Raise your arms and keep them up,' Ribeira snarled from the doorway with a commanding motion of his pistol. And, as Oliver slowly obeyed, 'Royce, eh?' he muttered. He kicked the prostrate form of the servant. 'It was you who laid out this carrion, yes? Well, my young friend, and what are you going to do now?'

'I'll tell you,' said Oliver, 'I'm going to take Miss Morrisot away. That gun doesn't frighten me!'

'I move my finger only a little half-inch,' was the retort, 'and your brains they will fly all over that door at your back. You poor young fool, your curiosity is likely to prove expensive.'

The boy gulped. 'You can't bluff me. I know you. You're Henri Laurent, the man who shot Morrisot and Célie Richard in the rue Saint-Lazare. If you'll take my advice, you'll put that gun away and get out while you can. If you wait here much longer, it may be too late and you'll go to the guillotine.'

'You little rat!' the man roared, 'you'd play the police nose, would you? You've passed sentence of death on yourself, will you understand that? Turn round and face that door!'

A cry rang through the shed. Instinctively Oliver's glance sought the place where Jack was lying. She had risen to her feet. 'Neque,' she exclaimed hoarsely in French, 'for the love of God, think what you're doing. Let him go, and he'll swear not to give you away.' She turned to the boy. 'Won't you?'

But Oliver's reply was forestalled. 'Too late,' the harsh voice echoed sombrely through the shed. 'I leave my life in no man's hands.' A contemptuous foot indicated the massive body collapsed on the garage floor. 'Do you see him? He was with me out there. He served his time and came home. I had to trust him with my secret. But even with him I take no risks. See!'

And at a foot's range he discharged the pistol into the bullet head as it lay cheek to the ground.

The report roared through the garage. The body writhed convulsively, reared itself up a little way, fell forward, and was still. For a brief instant Oliver remained rooted to the spot with horror while something went drip — drip — drip in the ensuing silence. Then he sprang at the man with the pistol, vaguely conscious of a piercing scream that went reverberating through his brain.

But the other was on his guard. Back he bounded, like a fencer, his weapon levelled. 'Stay where you are!' he rasped. His laugh, mocking, crazy, was exultant. 'Now do you realize whom you have to deal with?' With slow deliberation he lifted the pistol and took steady aim.

Oliver had halted. His first thought was for Jack. This was her chance to escape. His despairing glance sought her, but now the space between Ribeira and the car was empty. The pistol barrel, darkly gleaming, was slowly jerking downwards. So this was how a man died. The great mortared stones of the garage walls, the heavy cross-beams of the roof, even a cobweb, iridescent in the merciless glare of the head-lamps — every detail registered crystal-clear upon his mind. Between him and that descending pistol barrel, in a dark pool that had now crept beyond the cramped, clutching hands, the body of the dead man was crumpled up on the earthen floor. Beyond him bright discs glittered in a bearded face and a steady hand came down, down...

And then, without warning, the garage was plunged in darkness.

The car-lights... Jack... the two thoughts sparked simultaneously in his mind as he flung himself face downwards on the floor. An orange flame streaked the blackness; the report was deafening under the lofty roof. Its echo seemed endless. Oliver, as he scrambled away behind the car, heard how it went on hammering insistently through the quiet house. Suddenly he realized with a thrill that some one was knocking loudly at the front door.

A voice went rumbling through the night. 'Open! We are the police!' The hammering continued, redoubled in volume and force. There were footsteps on the gravel outside. The big garage doors were shaking: some one from the inside was tugging at that refractory bolt and puffing and blowing with the exertion. A low cry: 'Oliver, Oliver, where are you?'

He slipped out from behind the car. The knocking was louder than ever. A slim form was silhouetted in the dim radiance from the corridor. Suddenly came a terrific battering on the garage doors. That peremptory summons again: 'Open! We are the police!' The shattering discharge of the pistol in that confined space seemed to stun him; there was a sharp cry from without. With ears singing he darted across to Jack at the door. Even as he reached her, there was the tinkle of glass above his head, an exultant shout. Another shot thundered out; a squat shape was silhouetted on the roof of the car with hand thrust through the window. A fusillade broke out on all sides; the whole world seemed filled with orange fire and reverberating detonations and the shiver of glass. Then a soft weight collapsed into his arms.

He gathered the girl up and bore her swiftly through the service door. A pencil of light clove the darkness of the lounge, dim figures came rushing, feet clumped heavily on the carpet. An anxious voice cried, 'Oliver...' Then the lights went on. Over Jack's tangled mop of hair, as she rested inert in his arms, Oliver found himself looking into the face of Harvey Nolan.

Men in bowlers streamed past him. Now there were shots in the corridor…

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE KILL

THE three of them, Jack, Oliver, and Harvey were in the room that had been Jack's, upstairs at Les Charmettes. Thither Oliver had carried her, and now she lay back on the bed, propped up with pillows. A little colour had come back to her cheeks and she was fully conscious. But she clung to Oliver's hand as he sat at the head of the bed while she told them her story. Harvey was perched at the foot, his arms folded, his dark, rather saturnine face in the shadow.

Below, the firing had abruptly ceased. The turmoil inside the house had given place to a great stir outside. Lights moved in the grounds, there was the sound of wheels and footsteps on the gravel before the house, and the excited murmurs of a growing crowd.

Jack had almost finished her recital. 'As I went into the garage,' she said, 'some one sprang at me. I felt a hand pressed over my mouth and nostrils, while an arm clutched me tight. I knew it must be Michel, for Ribeira was behind me. I suppose I stumbled backwards and struck my head; at any rate, I remember a violent blow and a buzzing in my ears and everything swaying about me as I struggled — that enormous hand almost stifled me. Then my wrists were seized from behind and twisted — I nearly fainted with the pain. A voice — it must have been Ribeira's — said, "They know how to treat spies where we come from, eh, Michel?" And then... and then ... a light seemed to go out. The next thing I remember is some one untying me in the dark and a dreadful choking feeling...'

She broke off and closed her eyes. Oliver looked at Harvey. 'She oughtn't to talk any more, I think,' he suggested.

But the girl had opened her eyes again and was smiling at Harvey. 'How did you get here?' she asked drowsily. 'There was all that knocking and shooting and in the middle of it you appeared...'

Harvey Nolan grinned. 'Better ask Oliver where I come into the picture,' he remarked. 'He sent me a message through a lady friend of his...'

'It was Miss Fitch,' the boy explained, 'Mrs. Hersent's companion. I met her at the station...'

'Mrs. *Hersent's* companion?' Jack repeated.

'Didn't you know that this was Mrs. Hersent's house?'

'No. Did you?'

'It was only because I knew that Mrs. Hersent had a house here that I came out on the chance, when I discovered that Mrs. Bronstein had been telephoning to Rotival. I happened to remember that Mousie... Mrs. Hersent... and Ribeira were friends, that's all. Then I met Fitchie, and the rest was simple. But, Jack, you've talked enough: you ought to rest...'

'I'm all right, except my chest hurts me rather,' she answered. 'And I do so want to know how Harvey... how Mr. Nolan... got here.'

The American laughed. 'Harvey's shorter to say than Mr. Nolan, if it hurts to talk. My story's soon told. Half an hour after Oliver rushed off, the reply came from the Buenos Ayres police — we'd cabled them from Cannes about...' He jerked his head expressively in the direction of the door.

'Ah!' Oliver put in eagerly. 'What did they say?'

'Enough to make your friend Dufour as keen as mustard when I told him...'

'He telephoned, then?'

'I called him. He'd just come in. I took the cable straight round to him at police headquarters. It gave us the low-down on Ribeira all right. Buenos Ayres reported that he first arrived there from Caracas in October, 1921 — that's six months after Laurent escaped from Cayenne, Dufour says — with Argentine papers in the name of Ribeira. He was next heard of running a gambling-shop with a Dutchman, by name of Apeldoorn. The talk about Ribeira on the water-front was that he was an escaped French convict. The Buenos Ayres passport records show that in December, 1921, Ribeira took a steamer to Hamburg...'

'That would bring him to France in time to be at the rue Saint-Lazare in February, 1922,' Oliver commented.

'As Dufour remarked immediately,' Harvey replied. 'The next trace of Ribeira at Buenos Ayres dates from June, 1926. He then figured in a shemozzle at the Bella Vista apartment house, where he was living, having arrived from the United States eighteen months before. His former partner, Apeldoorn, showed up and made a scene which ended in Ribeira sending for the police. Apeldoorn spilled a yarn about Ribeira's papers being false, that Ribeira stole them from an Argentine who had shipped in the same boat with him from Caracas. However, it seems that the Dutchman's story was never investigated. He was drunk, and next day Ribeira withdrew the charge. He fixed the police captain, I guess. But now the Buenos Ayres police have ascertained that an Argentine called Ribeira did actually ship in the fo'csle of the Cristobal Colon from Caracas in September, 1921, and disappeared overboard in the course of the voyage. All this decided Dufour to give our friend Ribeira the once-over. The question, however, was, where was he? You,' he said, looking at Oliver, 'were missing, and there was no word of you when I rang up the apartment from Dufour's room. What with looking up Laurent's record and the rest, it was just nine when I got home and found your message. I got Dufour on the wire straightaway and we came right out here.' He paused. 'It looks to me,' he remarked slowly, 'as though the Inspector had got his identification.'

The door was softly tapped. Harvey opened it. Two men in overcoats and hats were there, and a woman, a buxom figure with face peering, rather scared, from a shawl wound round her head. One of the men came forward.

'The doctor,' he said in a hoarse whisper, indicating his companion. 'The Inspector sent up Madame Léonie here,' the man proceeded, 'to see if she could do anything for the young lady. She lives in the lodge down the road.'

Harvey fetched Oliver out. Jack seemed reluctant to let them go. 'The doctor just wants to take a peek at you, honey,' Harvey explained. 'By the time he's through, the ambulance will be here. We're going to send you to the American Hospital for a day or two. You've got to rest up, you know.'

Outside the plain-clothes man was waiting. 'The Inspector would like a word with you gentlemen,' he announced.

'It's all over, I suppose?' said Harvey as they went downstairs together. Oliver knew, without asking, what he meant.

'Sure,' agreed the detective impassively. 'You couldn't find a whole spot to lay a franc on his dial, it's that riddled.'

A light was burning in the garage now, a lone electric bulb that lit up a scene of devastation. One wing of the door hung lamentably on its hinges, the woodwork splintered and hacked down one side as though with blows from an axe; the wind-screen of the car was shattered, the metal body splashed with lead and holed in a dozen different places, while the ground was strewn with broken glass from the window, which showed a row of shivered panes. In the centre, under a cloud of cigarette smoke eddying blue in the electric light, a knot of men in street clothes formed a circle.

As Oliver and Harvey entered with their escort, a tall figure detached itself from the group and came to meet them. Inspector Dufour had not changed a whit. The bristling moustache and small *impériale*, the quick, piercing regard, the seedy black coat with the red wisp in the buttonhole — the years slid past Oliver Royce as he looked at his old acquaintance.

'It's our man all right,' the detective said to Harvey. 'We found the marks I spoke of...' Then, catching sight of Oliver, 'Tiens, Monsieur Royce! We were only just in time, it would appear. Well, that wolf will never rove again!' He turned and, at a gesture, the group parted.

The two dead bodies lay on their backs. Ribeira had been stripped of coat, waistcoat, and shirt. His undervest gaped, disclosing the hairy chest. The face was unrecognizable, smothered with blood, bruised and battered with bullets, blasted out of all human semblance. Only the mouth was unscathed; even in death the lips were set in a defiant snarl.

'Show!' the Inspector commanded curtly.

One of the party dropped on one knee, rolled up the right arm of the dead man's undervest and, with a heave, twisted the body round. The beam of a torch fell upon the upper arm and shoulder. Tattooed upon the yellowish skin were two crossed flags, beneath them the legend, traced in faded blue: *Vaincre ou mourir.*'

'Henri Laurent's identity card,' spoke the Inspector grimly.

He made a sign and his aide laid the body down.

'Always,' spoke Dufour, 'they come back to France. To savour the real taste of liberty, it seems they must sniff the air of home. We wait, and we get them. Always, in the end, we get them. Diable, Monsieur Royce,' he continued, clapping the boy on the shoulder, 'you were lucky to come off scot-free, you and the young lady. I count myself fortunate to have rid the world of that vermin at the price of only a single man winged in the shoulder. But you, shut up here with that brace of mad dogs, peste!'

His torch fell athwart the waxen face of Ribeira's companion.

'I knew him, too. "Bec Tourné," they called him, by reason of his nose. Five years of the Bagne he had for burglary and five years exile afterwards. He served his sentence and came home. He couldn't run straight; we had our eyes on him and that car of his. But the other was more dangerous. Brains.' He tapped his forehead. 'He had it here. It was I who arrested him in the first place, you know, all those years ago, for the shooting of Moritz Lazarus. In the hills beyond Corti, it was. We spent a week together on the way back from Corsica and a man couldn't have had a more interesting companion.

He could talk about anything, that one; well-read, you know, and intelligent. A fine journalist, too, they tell me. But he was the real killer type. Proud as Lucifer. The whole of humanity must serve him. And if he couldn't have his own way, he'd take it with a gun. I knew, when I came here to-night, that if it were Laurent and he went to ground, he'd fight to the death. That type always does. A beast of prey, quoi? I feel we ought to nail what's left of him to the door yonder, as a keeper does with the vermin he shoots...'

He snapped off his torch. 'Come, we will go into the house. I want to hear your story.'

The plain-clothes men had drifted away. Dufour and his companions were the last to leave. In silence, Oliver and his friend followed the Inspector out.

In the ravaged shed, deserted by all, the two still forms stared up with sightless eyes at a cobweb iridescent in the feeble light.

CHAPTER XXXIX

ENVOI

Mavis Rossway, Harvey Nolan's widowed sister, was a placid, grey-haired matron, who looked out with the same quizzing expression as her brother upon a world which evidently contained no further deceptions for her. Oliver raised his eyes from 'The New Yorker' he was fluttering, to see her at the door of the sitting-room, a trim, elegant figure in black, silently beckoning to him.

Ten days had elapsed since that night at Les Charmettes. Nine of these Jack had spent at the American Hospital. The morning after her admission symptoms of the nervous shock she had sustained declared themselves; one lung was troublesome, and she ran a high temperature. Mrs. Rossway, summoned from Aix by Harvey's wire, was a week at the rue de Presbourg before the doctors at Neuilly would allow the patient to be moved. Jack had been brought to the apartment only the day before the fine spring afternoon that found Oliver Royce waiting in the sitting-room to be admitted to see her.

'You can go in,' said Mrs. Rossway.

Oliver followed her out across the hall to the room that had been his. He had evacuated it to make room for Jack and gone to an hotel close by.

A small voice called out a cheery 'Hullo!' as he entered. The presence of that slight form in a white-and-gold kimono, propped up in the bed, transfigured the room for him. It seemed to be radiant with light and grace, filled with a spirit of youth and charm, the spirit of spring, like the huge bowl of Parma violets on the table, or the pallid sunshine that struck coppery tones out of the smoothly brushed hair against the snowy background of the pillows.

The hospital pallor lent her a fragile air and there were dark shadows round her eyes. But already the excitement of a visit had restored to the eager face something of its vital brightness. A nurse rose up from the bedside and glided away.

'Don't stay too long,' said Mrs. Rossway. Then she, too, was gone. Jack and he were alone.

He would have taken the nurse's chair. But Jack stopped him. 'Sit there!' she commanded, patting the bed. Her thin hands went about his and drew him down. She kept his hands in hers. 'There, that's better. And now,' she went on, 'tell me what happened to you! Why have you never been to see me?'

He was thinking, always to sit there, holding her hand, sating one's self with the sight of her, with the wistful charm of her face, the infinite grace of her every movement, the caress of her voice — thus might a man find peace. But at her question he averted his gaze.

'Dufour has left me scarcely a moment to myself,' he said stolidly. 'I seem to have spent days making statements before the Examining Magistrate. But I did see you at the Hospital, you know — twice, though only for a few minutes each time. You were pretty ill; I dare say you don't remember...'

'Those first days are rather a jumble in my head. I do seem to remember your face coming in and out of my dreams. Still, I've been having regular visitors since Sunday. Every day I expected you, but you never came. Didn't Harvey give you my message?'

He was staring out of the window. 'Yes. But I guessed you'd be busy with lawyers and things. Besides, I knew that Harvey and Mrs. Rossway were seeing you every day...' He broke off.

'They aren't you...' she began, then stopped. 'There are so many things I wanted to say. You know, I haven't thanked you yet for what you did at Rotival. When I think that if it hadn't been for you...'

He patted her hand reassuringly. 'I'm sure it isn't good for you to go back over all that now...'

'Nevertheless, I always think of the risks you took that night. There was something else, too, I had to say. Since I've been lying in bed, I've been thinking things out, Oliver. That afternoon at the Villa Célandine...'

He moved his shoulders restlessly. 'Oh, my dear...'

'I must say it. I was horrid to you, mean and priggish and unjust...'

He shook his head, his face sombre. 'No, you weren't. You were dead right. I'd lost my nerve, and you pulled me up. It's really I who owe you an apology for being such a fatuous fool about you and Ribeira. Have you forgiven me, Jack?'

'Ever so long ago.' She snuggled down in her cushions smiling up at him. 'Then we're friends again! How nice that is! Now you've got to tell me all about yourself...'

He gave her the bright smile she loved. 'You're ever so much more interesting than I am. What's Harvey's latest?'

'We shall hear this afternoon when he gets in from Cherbourg. He went there, you know, to meet the Cranstons' lawyer, who's coming over from America.'

The boy nodded. 'Yes. He told me he was going. Any more news of the money?'

'Mrs. Bronstein will fight the claim, Harvey thinks...'

'She can't go against that marriage certificate, surely? It's authentic, you know. When it was found among Ribeira's papers with those letters and things of yours, we wrote to Somerset House about it. Vincent Cranston and Célie Richard were married at the registry office in Henrietta Street, Covent Garden; — but Harvey must have told you. How's Mrs. Bronstein going to get over that?'

'Legal delays in America are endless. Harvey says she might hold the money up for years.'

'I wish to Heaven the police could have arrested the old baggage. She put Ribeira up to getting rid of you, I'm certain...'

'They could prove nothing against her. Perhaps it's just as well. Harvey says there has been enough fuss as it is. The newspapers keep ringing up. We shall see what the lawyer says...'

A little silence fell between them. Oliver broke it. 'Do you remember telling me at Cannes how you used to hear the big world calling when you were a kid in Paris, trotting the streets to and from your work? Your day-dreams are coming true, Jack. You're an heiress; you can live where you like; travel... The big world is calling you with a vengeance...'

The brown eyes were suddenly clouded as though with a shadow. But he missed the change in her expression. He was gazing down at her fingers as they rested between his.

She sighed. 'I suppose it sounds ungrateful, but it doesn't mean much to me now.'

'That's only because you're not fit yet. Wait until you're well...'

'It won't make any difference. I'm a working-woman. I was meant to work for my living, I believe.' Her face lit up. 'I say, what do you think? I've had a letter from

Victor. You never read such gush. He wants me to come back to him...'

Oliver laughed. 'By George, rather a triumph, isn't it? It's like his cheek thinking you're going back to selling his mouldy frocks for him now...'

'They're lovely frocks,' she corrected him. 'I was happy at Victor's you know.'

His face had hardened; he was staring out of the window. 'Has it ever occurred to you that Harvey likes you tremendously?'

She nodded emphatically. 'But what's that got to do with it? Are you suggesting I ought to marry him?'

'Is there any doubt about it?'

'How so?'

'Well, with all the money he has got...'

'I can't see what attraction that is. If this inheritance is all right, as you say it is, I shall have all the money I'm likely to want.'

'You like Harvey, don't you?'

'Most awfully. I think he's a dear.'

'Do you love him?'

'I don't know. What do you think?'

He dropped her hand. 'What an absurd question! How the devil do I know?' He paused. 'Has he asked you to marry him?'

'He's always asking me...'

'Then why don't you?'

'Would you advise me to?'

His face was resolutely turned away... 'Why not? He's a good chap, only he's been rather spoilt. I believe he'd make you happy if you didn't spoil him...'

'Do you think I'd spoil a husband, Oliver?'

He shrugged his shoulders rather savagely. 'I don't know. I never thought about it.' His voice was ungracious.

The door opened and the nurse came in. 'It's time for your visitor to go, Miss Morrisot...'

'Oh,' the girl exclaimed, 'he's only just arrived!'

'The doctor said you were not to tire yourself, you know. Mr. Royce can come back again to-morrow...'

Oliver had stood up. 'I'll be off now, Jack,' he said rather huskily.

Her fingers fastened themselves about the hand he gave her. 'Good-bye, Oliver, dear. Come back to-morrow and give me some more advice.' He looked abruptly away. But her hands held him fast and he had to face her. 'Come closer,' she whispered, and drew him down. For a brief instant her lips touched his.

Impulsively his arms went out as though to enfold her, then fell limply to his sides. She released his hands and with rather anxious eyes watched him as he stood there, struggling with himself as though he had something to say, but were in two minds as to whether he should say it. Suddenly he turned about, and, without word or glance, was gone.

At eight o'clock that evening Harvey and Oliver sat in the lounge at Ciro's. Harvey was giving Oliver the gist of his talk with Howard Deeley, the Cranston family solicitor, who was to join Nolan there for dinner.

'Geoff Cranston, Vincent's uncle, who dealt with the Célie Richard business,' said Harvey, 'is dead. But Deeley has handled all the private affairs of the Cranstons for the past thirty-five years, and he declares that Uncle Geoff certainly knew nothing about any marriage, or he would have told him. Mrs. Cranston, Vincent's mother, was alive in those days. It seems that she was about the only person that Vin was really afraid of — I knew her, a big, bouncing San Franciscan, she was, and a bit of a handful. It's quite on the cards that Vin was able to persuade the girl to say nothing about the marriage. Incidentally, she knocked down twenty-five thousand bucks over it, so I guess she had no kick coming — she could afford to play the game. Of course, the whole idea was just crazy, because this secret marriage naturally invalidated any future marriage that Vin might enter into. But then he was always plumb nutty. And equally, it knocks Ma Bronstein for a row of safety curlers as, of course, Vin's marriage to her daughter was bigamous...'

'Then you think that Jack's money is all right?' There was a note of trepidation in the boy's question.

Harvey paused to sip his cocktail. 'Uh-huh. That marriage certificate puts old Mother B. clean out of court. She'll fight us to the last ditch, of course; if she'd meant to come to terms she'd have let me see her before she went back to America. I don't know yet what Deeley intends to do. I've got an idea he's brought some proposition from the family to put up to Jack. He's seeing her in the morning. Jack looks fine, don't you think?' he added. 'Mavis and I are thinking of taking her down South in the yacht. No, not to Cannes,' he laughed. 'To Sicily, and perhaps from there across to Tunis...'

Oliver drained his cocktail and set down the glass. His action had an air of finality. 'Harvey,' he said, 'I've been your guest for nearly a fortnight now. I'm not going to sponge on you any more...'

'Oh, pshaw to that stuff,' his friend retorted. 'What's your hurry, son?' He spoke with his usual nonchalance. But there was an edge of interest to his voice.

'I'd like to get back to newspaper work. You can help me there, if you will. Could you give me a letter, a good, strong letter, to your cousin at "The Sentinel"?'

'Sure I will. But Maurice is in New York...'

'I know. My idea is to go to America and work there.' He hesitated. 'Look here, Harvey, I hate to do it, but I have to ask you to advance me the fare. If "The Sentinel" takes me on, I'll make them stop it out of my salary...'

'"The Sentinel" will take you on O.K. if I slip Maurice the word. But hold your horses, boy. This wants thinking out. What's Jack going to say? She thinks a lot of you, Oliver. She's always asking about you; she says you've neglected her.'

'There's no need for Jack to know until I've gone. The Île de France leaves to-morrow...'

'To-morrow?' Harvey put his hand on the boy's sleeve. 'Say, old man, what's at the back of this?'

'Nothing,' he replied stolidly. 'I'm restless, that's all. And I want to get away.'

The American shook his head dubiously. 'It's not fair on Jack. She's fond of you, Oliver, and...'

'Good God!' the boy broke out, 'have I got to dot every damned *i* and cross every *t*? Can't you see that that's precisely the reason I'm clearing out?'

Harvey nodded understandingly. 'Sorry. I get you now.' He appeared to reflect. 'I ought to tell you that I've asked Jack to marry me,' he said after a long pause.

'I know...'

'She told you?'

'Yes...'

'And yet you're going away?'

Oliver made no answer. His fingers drummed on the arm of his chair. 'I'd like to travel down to Havre to-night. There's a train at nine something. My things are packed.'

Harvey Nolan had taken out his note-case and was skimming through a sheaf of notes. 'Will five hundred dollars see you through?'

'That would be ample...' A wad of bills passed across the table. The American crooked a finger at a hovering waiter. 'Writing-paper!' he ordered.

There was silence while he wrote. He addressed the envelope and sealed it. 'I've closed the envelope,' he said as he gave Oliver the letter. 'Maurice boasts that he never reads introductions. But he'll read that one. Aren't you going to stay and meet Deeley?' he added, for Oliver had risen to his feet. 'You could order something to eat quickly.'

'I've got to pick up my things at the hotel. I can dine on the train.' He put out his hand. 'Good-bye, Harvey. Say something nice to Mrs. Rossway from me, and thank you a thousand times...'

'Forget it,' said the American. His air was perplexed. 'What am I going to say to Jack — will you tell me that?'

'Tell her the truth. Say that I've gone back to work. Good-bye, Harvey. Sorry I was such a rotten steward...'

The other laughed, but his mien was rather forlorn. 'Any time you want a reference, Oliver...' he drawled.

'As a valet?'

'No. As a white man!'

They gripped hands.

CHAPTER XL

THE MYSTERY OF B THIRTY-EIGHT

THE Aquitania was at Quarantine.

With the sudden cessation of the vibration as the propellers came to rest, the midsummer heat seemed to have descended upon the great ship, the wind that tore at the canvas awnings to bring with it the warm breath of New York gasping to landward under the July sky. Feet trampled up and down the staircases; there were strange brassbound caps and blue uniforms in the smoke-room; on the flat outside the purser's office the wardrobe trunks were piling up.

A dark, slim man in well-fitting grey flannel came quickly along the passage from the B deck staterooms. A youth in a straw hat, who was standing expectantly by the purser's office, pounced upon him.

'Isn't this Mr. Nolan?'

'That is so...'

'I'm from the "Evening Post." Had a good trip?'

'Fine. Did any one from "The Sentinel" come out with you fellows?'

'Sure, Mr. Nolan. Royce.'

'Where is he, do you know?'

'He was on the promenade deck awhile back. He was looking for you...'

'I'll be right back...' Harvey Nolan took the stairs three at a time.

On the promenade deck he was brought up short. Oliver Royce came swinging towards him, straw-hatted, vestless, a bundle of newspapers in his hand, a cigarette in his mouth, the complete reporter.

'Harvey!'

'Oliver! Well, well, well...'

They shook hands.

'You had my wireless?'

The boy was radiant. 'Rather!'

'Well, how's tricks?'

'Wonderful...'

'You seem to have made a hit with Cousin Maurice...'

Oliver blushed. 'He's been devilish decent to me...'

'And what are you doing with yourself?'

'Just general reporting. Descriptive writing mostly. How's Jack?'

'As pretty as a picture. Have you heard from her at all?'

The boy coloured. 'Not very lately. The last letter was from Palermo...'

'We left there a month ago. We've been in Paris for the last three weeks...'

'When is she coming out to America?' he paused. 'I thought she might be with you...'

'She was talking of going to Switzerland with Mavis...'

'She has never written me a single word about the money, though I've asked her scores of times. What's happened about it?'

'It's a long story,' said Harvey. 'You're going to dine with me to-night, you know. I'll tell you about it at dinner...'

The boy looked irresolute. 'And you and Jack?' he faltered at last. 'How's that progressing, Harvey?'

The American laughed. 'I told you ages ago that my trouble is that the women I like don't like me. Jack won't marry me, that's final!'

Oliver caught his arm. 'The bar's closed. But I bet you've got a bottle in your stateroom. Let's go and have a drink.'

Harvey rounded on him. 'You're the hell of a fine friend! Is that all the sympathy I get for a broken heart? I'm busy now, anyway. I've got to go round distributing largesse...'

'To hell with that!' the boy exclaimed. 'I want to celebrate...'

'Well, maybe I'll fix you later,' said Harvey, laughing. 'Listen, do you want a story, a crackerjack, a humdinger, an out-and-out beat?'

'Does a cat like cream?' riposted the young man from 'The Sentinel.'

'Who do you think's on board?'

'The King, Hindenburg, Rosie Dolly, Bernard Shaw... how many guesses do I get?'

'Montagu Norman!'

'The Governor of the Bank of England?'

'You've said it. Incognito.'

The boy's eyes sparkled. 'One of his secret trips, eh? about the Debt...'

'That's about it.'

'Has anybody else spotted him?'

'I don't think so. He's registered in an assumed name, of course.'

'Do you know what it is?'

'I couldn't find out. But I can tell you his stateroom number. It's B 38. He was in there just now as I came up...'

'I say, Harvey, this is great! I'm tremendously obliged. Will he talk, do you think?'

'Well, you can try him, can't you?'

'I'll go right along. And we'll have that drink after. What's your number?'

'B 105, on the other side.'

The boy sprinted off along the deck.

The door of B 38 was shut. Oliver knocked and, getting no answer, turned the handle and walked in. A mound of luggage occupied the centre of the floor, a wardrobe trunk, some suitcases. But of the man he was searching for there was no sign. He glanced at the trunk. It bore a large white 'C' on the side. A label was attached to the handle. 'Jacqueline Cranston,' he read. He turned and saw her.

She was standing very straight against the wall behind the door, her cheeks pink, her eyes shining. Then she came flying into his arms.

'It's very easy to get married in America, isn't it?' she whispered, looking up at him.

He clung to her hungrily. 'It's easy enough. But, Jack, you're not for me...'

She rumpled his fair curls with her fingers. 'Dear, dear Oliver, I know why you went away. But you needn't think about that money any more. The Cranstons won't fight Mrs. Bronstein; they don't want any further scandal about Vincent — about my father, you know. Mrs. Geoff Cranston has offered to adopt me and to leave me the two hundred thousand dollars in her will...'

'And you've accepted?'

'Yes. Mrs. Cranston wants me to go and live with her. I suppose I shall have to unless...' She knotted her fingers about his neck. 'Oh, Oliver, boy, all these people mean so little to me. I don't want marvellous frocks and lady's-maids and Rolls-Royces and Riviera life all-the-year-round. I used to think I should like it, but I was wrong. What I want is happiness...'

He tightened his arms about her. 'And what I want is you.'

She rested her tawny head against his shoulder. 'Dear me, how lovely it is to hear that! We'll make Harvey ring up Mrs. Cranston, shall we, and tell her that I can't come out and stay with her as I'm getting married. She can leave us the money; it'll do for our children.'

'You realize that we'll have to live quietly for a bit until I earn more? And, Jack, darling, I shall earn more very soon. I'm going to make good now that I've got something, somebody, to work for...'

'I realize everything,' she said, 'except how happy we're going to be...'

There was a soft rap, and Harvey Nolan put his head round the door. They sprang hastily apart.

'Well, old boy,' drawled Harvey, 'didn't I tell you it was a good story?'

Oliver grinned. 'Yes. But the news is in the last paragraph.'

He put out his hand and drew Jack to him.

THE END

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY
3 9999 10025 031 3

Valentine Williams

is a Londoner who is at home in the leading capitals of Europe and, like Oppenheim, in the gay world that glitters along the Riviera. A man does not have to wear a white collar to engage his attentive ear; among his acquaintances he numbers soldiers of fortune, Russian Bolsheviks, and members of the Paris detective force. Through his marriage to Miss Alice Crawford, the talented Australian actress, Mr. Williams has an interesting connection with the English stage. His tennis game is still formidable in spite of his encounter with a six-inch shell during the battle of the Somme.

The life of Valentine Williams has been one long adventure. He has picked his heroes and villains, his characters and situations, from the grist of many and varied experiences. That is why his mystery stories have the true ring of actuality; that is why Valentine Williams has raised his work above the level of mere story-telling. 'I have only two aims in my writing,' says Mr. Williams, 'to be original and to be plausible.'

BY VALENTINE WILLIAMS

The Mysterious Miss Morrisot
The Knife Behind the Curtain
The Crouching Beast
The Eye in Attendance
The Key Man
Mr. Ramosi
The Red Mass
Clubfoot the Avenger
The Three of Clubs
The Orange Divan
Island Gold
The Yellow Streak

NEW NOVELS

TATTER'D LOVING
By Phyllis Bottome

STARRY ADVENTURE
By Mary Austin

WHITE JADE
By Maude Meagher

THE OPEN SECRET
By Oliver Onions

FIVE ON PARADE
By Doris Peel

BID HER AWAKE
By Mary Grigs

DIXON'S CUBS
By John C. Moore

YEARS OF GRACE
By Margaret Ayer Barnes

THE ANVIL
By Gustav Frenssen

THE YOUNG LIVINGSTONES
By Denis Mackail

THE MIDDLE WATCH
By Ian Hay and Stephen King-Hall

A MODERN GALAXY
Assembled by Dale Warren

THARLANE
By Dorothy Cottrell

DAYS OF HER LIFE
By Wallace Irwin

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY